Walter Mosley: Little Brother

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

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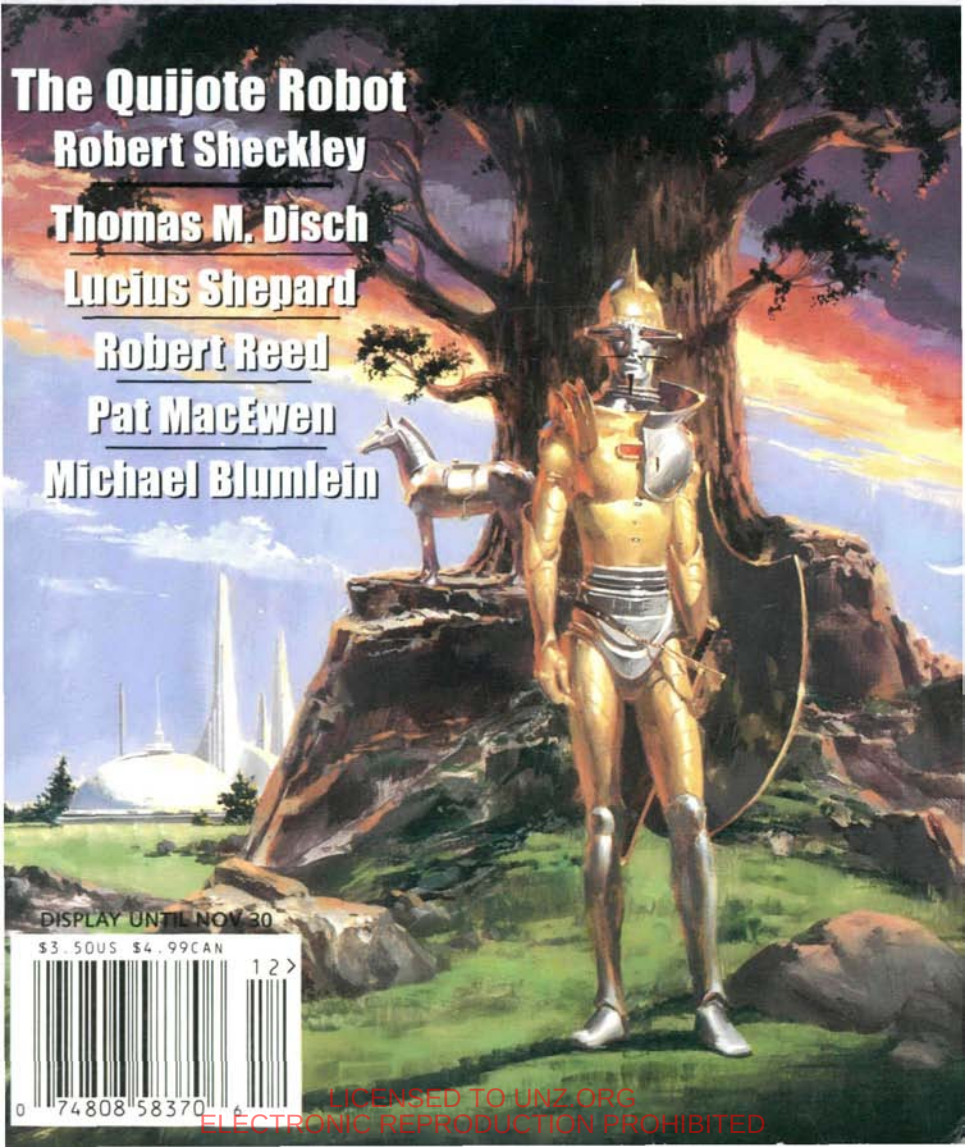

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NEW FROM ASPECT

FUTURELAND: NINE STORIES OF AN IMMINENT WORLD BY WALTER MOSLEY

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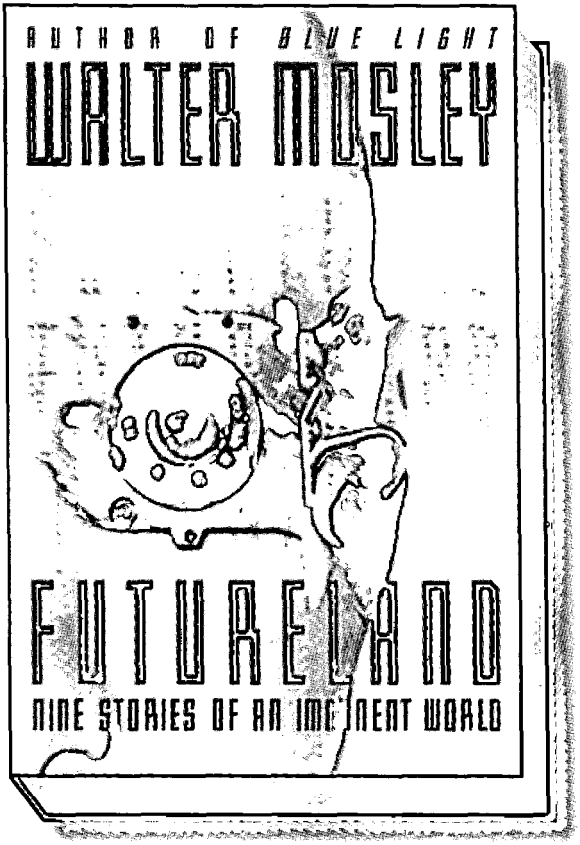

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FUTURELAND: NINE STORIES OF AN IMMINENT WORLD BY WALTER MOSLEY

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
December • 53rd Year of Publication

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 101, No. 6, Whole No. 601, December 2001. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.50 per copy. Annual subscription $38.97; $48.97 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2001 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.

Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
www.fsfmag.com

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

WELL, WE didn't intend to run a contest for cartooning those captions, but the entries we received were all amusing. The real reason our cartoons didn't print in the October issue was simply a technological glitch that both we and our printer regret.

As we're coming to the end of the first year of transition from Mercury Press to Spilogale, I'd like to apologize for the various errors we've made — subscription mixups, more typos, and now these dropped cartoons — and say thanks to you readers for your patience and understanding.

By far the biggest error in the October issue was the mistaken belief that Poul Anderson would live forever. Poul died just a few days before the first copies came off the presses. He was a scholar and a gentleman and his story "The Longest Voyage" left an indelible impression on the sixth grade student I once was.

Perhaps it's simply because Poul did seem eternal and his work touched so many of us, but there was a strong reaction in the sf community of feeling that the giants of the field are leaving us. Because sf and fantasy affect us so powerfully in our youth, I think we're prone to exaggerate such nostalgic sentiments. While we mourn Poul — and also his longtime friend Gordon R. Dickson, who died several months back — let's remember too that sf and its readers will remain eternally young so long as we keep our minds open to the wonders of the world.

—GVG

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Robert Reed is the author of such novels as An Exaltation of Larks, Beyond the Veil of Stars, *and* Marrrow. *He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. Reviewers often call him prolific, quite aptly, since a year rarely goes by without seeing half a dozen stories or more from him gracing the pages of various science fiction magazines. We alone published five stories of his in 2001. He and his wife Leslie are looking to increase their prolificity—they're expecting their first child by the time this story sees print.*

"Raven Dream" is an intriguing story that promises to be the start of a series—we hope to bring you further adventures in the future.

Raven Dream

By Robert Reed

"NOTHING BUT THE WORLD is real and true," Grandfather began. His voice was soft, whispery and wise. His eyes were as black as the darkness beneath the good ground. "Everything that does not belong to the world is false and untrue," he continued. "It is the stuff of spirits."

"It is a lie," Raven continued, knowing the lesson by heart. "Spirit stuff only looks like green grass and white sand."

Grandfather smiled at the boy. "Who rules in the spirit realm?"

"The demons rule it," Raven answered.

Then the old man waved his good hand, signifying each of the four winds. "And what do we know about the demons?"

"They should be feared," Raven replied.

Grandfather nodded and said nothing, a crooked smile revealing the last of his yellowed teeth.

The boy looked at the sky and across the darkened land. Quietly, he mentioned, "The spirit realm must be very large."

"It is large. Yes."

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"And the world is small," Raven added.

"Oh, no," said Grandfather. "The world is plenty huge. It feeds our bellies and our senses, does it not? If a small boy wanders away from home, won't he lose his way in the world?" Then the old man laughed, adding, "The same as you swallow a grasshopper, the world can swallow you. If you wander off, you will get lost and die without a proper burial, and your miserable soul will never return to the earth."

Even smiling, Grandfather was a scary presence.

"As long as you are a boy," he continued, "you must remain home. You may not go farther than the river or the sky."

"Yes, Grandfather. I know what is allowed."

Their home was inside a great hill that stood beside the river. All the world's water flowed past their feet. The channel was too wide to leap across, and where the river cut against the hill, it swirled, making a deep, dangerous hole. Even the strongest man respected the water's power. Raven liked to follow one of the narrow trails down to the river's lip, and there he would practice hiding as he watched the chill water slide past. Tangles of dead junipers let him vanish. Like any boy in his seventh year, he knew how to remain perfectly still, breathing in secret, blinking only when the pain in his eyes was unbearable. He knew how to watch the world with all of his senses. The sun would fall, pulling the night across the sky, and after a little while, Raven's brother and uncle and the other men would slip down the trails. They moved downstream, crossing where the river was straight and shallow. What noise they made was hidden by the water sounds. What footprints they made were washed away in moments. Like graceful threads of darkness, the hunters climbed up the far bank, and then Raven's brother, or maybe his uncle, would look back at him. The boy could hide in many places, but they always knew where he was. Raven didn't fool them, and they never pretended to be fooled, and for at least one more night, he was still very much the child.

Afterward, when he couldn't see them anymore, Raven would put away his sadness and climb to the sky. The world had no higher place. Just past the windy crest, limbless dead trees stood in a perfect line stretching from dawn to dusk. Metal ropes, thin and bright, were strung between the trees. This was the end of the world; everything beyond only pretended to

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be real. Only a grown man could slip beneath the lowest rope. Only a brave man properly trained and purified could hope to survive that magical realm. Demons were demons, dangerous by any measure; but because they were demons, they also had treasures worth stealing. Two or three times every year, Raven's uncle — the bravest, holiest man in the world — journeyed alone into the spirit realm. He would be gone for days and days, returning home with a heavy pack jammed full of gifts. Then afterward, Uncle would keep to himself, pretending to be deaf while staring hard at nothing, moving his lips, talking to the demons that were plainly haunting his mind.

"Why is the world shaped as it is, Grandfather?"

"Because it is the world, Raven."

The boy and old man were sitting on the hilltop, inside a little bowl of packed sand. Raven watched the river move in the moonlight and listened to the constant chittering of insects. A wind was blowing straight from summer. The two of them wore demon clothes decorated with tufts of grass and smudges made with blackened coals. Neither moved, and neither spoke louder than a whisper.

"Does the world need a reason to have its shape?"

Raven hesitated, and then he said, "Yes, Grandfather."

The old man had a wrinkled face and long hair that had turned white years before Raven was born. When Grandfather was young, a demon had shattered his arm and left it crippled. His old legs were losing their strength. But he was wise. He had experience and a practical nature, and his answers were shaped to serve a purpose. He looked at the boy, and then he sighed and looked back over his shoulder, staring out into the spirit realm. "You are right. All things beg for a shape."

The boy nodded and smiled.

"And the world just happens to have its own shape. Is that too difficult to accept?"

"No, Grandfather." Raven used a finger, drawing in the sandy earth. He made a line and another line, marking the borders with winter and summer, and then he drew a curling line between them. He drew the river that he could see from above, and he added what he knew from stories. Each bend of the river had its name. Every waterfall and every rapids were famous. Grown trees had histories worth knowing by heart. Raven was

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barely in his seventh year, but he knew the world from the stories that were told in the cool dampness of the underground.

Grandfather watched him, and after a long moment, he took his good hand and finished the drawing. Two more straight lines marked dawn and dusk, cutting across the ends of the river.

He said, "This is the world."

"I know, Grandfather."

"You can never doubt its shape."

"I know."

But instead of dropping the subject, the old man asked, "What would be a better shape? If you were to choose."

Raven shrugged, admitting, "I do not know."

"Think about it. Think hard."

They sat in the darkness, neither speaking. Upriver, the short-hairs were mooing about nothing. One of the demon machines blinked and rumbled as it crossed the sky. Then a buck deer came out of the spirit realm, stopping before the metal ropes to sniff at the wind. When the deer felt safe, it leaped, an easy strength carrying it over the highest rope, black hooves landing in the grass inside the world. Then Raven moved, and the deer spooked, bounding off into the trees.

But Grandfather did not reprimand him. Instead, he watched the boy draw an enormous circle around the square world. Where they were sitting was the circle's center. Why that shape seemed right, Raven didn't know. But it felt right, and he said so.

Grandfather nodded, and after a moment, he said, "Yes."

He said, "This is the shape of the spirit realm," and he threw his good arm over his grandson. "It is a sign, I think. You knowing this already."

"Is it a good sign?" asked the boy.

"Unless it brings evil," Grandfather allowed. "Truthfully, it is too early even to guess about such things."

Demons looked much like people. They walked on two legs and spoke like real men and women, and they wore clothes and carried all manner of tools. But their walk was a noisy, graceless shamble, and their words came out too fast, twisted around a strange, inhuman tongue. Their

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clothes were made from stuff not found in the world, and their tools were magical things that could only come from the spirit realm.

A few demons had names.

There was Yellow Hair and Cold Stone; but most familiar to Raven was a large, round-faced creature named Blue Clad. Blue Clad was named for his blue trousers and various blue coats. He usually came from dawn, riding inside a noisy metal wagon that everyone knew by sound and sight. He usually kept his wagon on the open grass and the smaller hills. Sometimes he cut across what was real, traveling to some other part of the spirit realm. But on other days, Blue Clad brought Yellow Hair and Cold Stone. Working together, the three demons would lead a herd of short-hairs to where the world's sweet grass waited, or they would fix the metal ropes around the world, or they would take away their fat animals, leaving the grass to grow tall again.

Most demons didn't require names. They usually came in summer, riding down the river inside metal bowls. The bowls were long and narrow, gliding easily across the water. A person could hear them from three bends downriver. They were noisy creatures, spanking the water with flat pieces of wood, kicking at the bright metal, talking endlessly and loudly while laughing with their coarse voices, seeing nothing of the beautiful world sliding past their bright, blinded eyes.

Late one day, four demons appeared on the river.

It was that next summer. Raven was in his eighth year, almost a man. When Uncle brought word of intruders, the boy set to work with the adults, brushing away footprints and picking up the occasional bit of trash. Then together, the people moved underground. Doors were dragged into place and lowered and sealed. The only light fell through the air holes, and then one of the old demon torches was lit, and people sat in its tired light and waited.

Only Uncle and Grandfather were outside. When the demons had passed, they would give the signal by pounding their feet.

A long while passed. Then when the pounding came, it was the wrong signal. Twice and then twice again, someone struck the main door. Raven's mother helped pull the door open. The darkness outside was bright compared to the darkness underground. Grandfather crawled through, his narrow face smiling but his voice sad and worried. "They

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are not leaving," he admitted. "The demons made camp on the far bank."

Raven wanted to climb outside and look. But he didn't move or breathe, watching the old man shuffle down the narrow passageway. Straightening his back, Grandfather said, "The demons are using our river and our firewood. Your uncle had to leave for a time. I want you to go down there in place of him. Go down and steal a treasure or two. Would you do that for me?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

The old man was speaking to Raven's brother. Snow-On-Snow was in his twelfth year, which made him a full man. He was taller than his brother, but not by much, and he was famous for his endless caution.

"Use your night clothes," Grandfather suggested. "And I have a charm that will help you."

"Thank you, Grandfather."

Raven said nothing, but a sound leaked from his lips.

Grandfather turned. He wasn't even pretending to smile. In the weak light of the demon lamp, he looked angry. But with his calmest voice, he said, "I was going to send you with your brother. But if you can't control your tongue here, how can we trust you down there?"

"You can trust me, Grandfather." Raven dipped his head, and in every way possible, he made no sound.

A leathery hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Night clothes," Grandfather said to him. "And since you are not ready for this duty, I will give you a very powerful charm."

But Raven was ready. He slipped back into the little chamber where he kept his few possessions, and in the blackness, by feel alone, he found the black demon clothes and black mask that would cover him completely. They were old clothes that still smelled of their long-ago owners. That enhanced their power. When Raven was dressed, he came into the main tunnel. Everyone was waiting for him. Snow-On-Snow was speaking to the charm around his neck, begging for its help. Grandfather handed Raven an owl foot with owl feathers tied to the bone, the wing of a bat wrapped around everything. Raven pretended to speak to the charm, but only because the others were watching. Then he tucked it inside his black shirt and looked at the staring faces.

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"Take treasures," said Grandfather. "But not too much."

"We will and we won't," Snow-On-Snow promised.

The brothers climbed outside, bare feet making no sound on the hard summer earth. The door was sealed behind them. Suddenly there was nobody in the world but them. The demons were chattering and laughing. Raven saw the flickering fire between the trees. The fire was enormous, throwing shadows in all directions. It was summer, but a cool wind was blowing from the winter. Raven smelled smoke and something else. What was that smell? He nearly asked, but then his brother put his mouth to Raven's ear. "We wait until they sleep," he whispered.

"Wait where?" Raven asked.

"Here."

But they were still high above the river. Raven shook his head, whispering, "We can move closer. I know where."

Snow-On-Snow thought he meant those tangles of old junipers.

"But I have a better place to hide," said Raven. "All summer, whenever you go hunting, you and Uncle and the rest of the men walk past me."

"We do not."

"And you never notice me," Raven promised.

"Where is that?" his brother asked.

"On the far shore," Raven confessed.

"You're too young to cross the river," Snow-On-Snow reminded him. But he was impressed, and a little curious, too. "All right then. Show me where you mean."

AN OLD ASH TREE named Two-Hawk-Perch collapsed last winter, and a feast of nettles had grown up around its shattered body. It made a wonderful hiding place. The brothers crept inside the ring of nettles, ignoring the itching of their bare hands, confident that no demon would dare look here. The bottomland was thick with ash trees and cottonwoods. The sandy ground beneath the trees had been stripped of its grass by the hungry short-hairs. Four demons stood with their backs to the night, laughing and talking in their harsh, quick language. In a breath, Raven heard more demon-talk than ever before in his life. And he

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recognized some of it. "Machine," he heard. And "Stupid." And one demon said, "Fuck," both that word and its angry tone very familiar.

The demons had a bottle. Passing it from one hand to the next, each took a long sip and held it in his mouth, and after the last demon had his fill, they spat out what looked like water. Except this water caused the fire to blossom and roar, singeing the branches high in the surrounding trees.

Demons liked poisons. They drank them and ate them, and that was one reason that they were demons.

Raven wondered how it would taste, having that false water in your mouth?

A demon turned abruptly, shuffling toward their hiding place. He was small and clumsy. With both hands, he opened his pants, and he stopped at the edge of the nettles, taking a long, slow pee. His prick was small and wrong-looking. His face had a wild hairiness, and his eyes were stupid and slow. But nothing about the demon was genuinely unpleasant. That was what Raven was thinking, watching the creature pee and shake its prick and laugh in a joyous, honest way.

The bottle was emptied, and another bottle was opened and drained. Then the four demons crawled inside a pair of shelters, and in another breath or two, the night was filled with the sounds of deep, wet snoring.

The brothers crept forward.

"Demons sleep hard," Uncle liked to say. "They sleep so hard, you could steal their arms, and they wouldn't even feel your knife."

Remembering the phrase, Raven laughed.

"Quiet," Snow-On-Snow warned.

The Moon had fallen behind the hills. The brothers picked their way through slick bags and bulging packs. A metal box was set near the dying fire, held shut with a metal clamp. Snow-On-Snow tried to open the box, then gave up. Seeing the opportunity to better his brother, Raven stared at the clamp until he saw it perfectly, and he quietly twisted it, releasing the lid, a breath of damp cold air leaking out.

Inside the box was a marvel. Ice. The ice was in pieces, floating in icy water, and with it were metal bottles and glass bottles and a great plastic tube filled with what looked like meat.

Meat was a treasure worth stealing.

Raven claimed the tube and sucked on chunks of ice. Snow-On-Snow

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went down by the water, looking at the long metal bowls. Raven eased up alongside the demons' shelters. One shelter was yellow, the other orange. He touched the taut fabric and ropes, and he picked up a soggy boot and turned it over. Something small and yellow tried to fall free. He caught it and held it up to the firelight. A narrow rope clung to the treasure, and there was a curl of metal at the rope's far end. A soft button waited beneath his thumb. He touched the button, and sounds began to leak from the curled metal. Raven heard voices. Putting the curled metal to his ear, he made the voices become louder. For an instant, he nearly panicked. But Snow-On-Snow heard nothing. He was bending over another pack, tugging at a little zipper. Did anyone notice him? Grandfather might be watching, but from a distance. Raven decided that he didn't care. He pressed the button again, and the voices stopped. Then he moved to a brush pile, fitting his dangerous treasure beneath a slab of rotted wood.

Snow-On-Snow noticed Raven and began walking toward him, wearing a curious face; but then a demon cried out, and the orange shelter twisted as legs and arms flailed wildly.

The brothers ran back to their hiding place, each carrying a single treasure. Raven had the meat, and Snow-On-Snow had a pair of odd moccasins. The young men had barely hidden when the screaming demon crawled into the open, followed by his shelter mate. Then a third demon looked out of the other shelter, asking a question, and the scared demon answered him.

Raven heard another word that he recognized.

"Dream," he heard.

The first two demons threw wood on the fire. Soon the bottomland was lit up like day. The dreaming demon was the same creature that had pissed in front of them. He sat on the metal box, wearing almost nothing. His face was sad and bothered. Whatever the dream, it had been terrible. The other demon said soft words and looked at his friend and said more words. That was what they were doing when Blue Clad came out of the darkness.

He rode up inside his metal wagon. The demons never noticed him, hearing nothing but the crackling sputter of their own fire. A pair of twin lights ignited, slicing across the campsite. The two demons climbed to their feet. Wagon doors swung open. A familiar voice, rough and loud,

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shouted at the invaders. Then came the sharp clean sound of metal against metal, and a second voice, younger and a little scared, called out, "Hands up! Do it!"

Yellow Hair was with his father. He was a small demon, like his mother. His hands held a shotgun. Blue Clad pointed a rifle at the sky. He looked huge and furious, his brown skin shiny with sweat, his blue trousers dirty at the knees, thick arms shaking and his breath coming hard until he found his voice.

He said "Who," followed by more words.

The nameless demons answered, their voices sloppy and quick. Then the other demons crawled from their shelter, looking angry and confused.

Blue Clad said, "Shut up!"

Then he spat out more words.

The demons glanced at each other, their mouths hanging open.

"Now!" Yellow Hair shouted, drawing a circle with the barrel of his shotgun.

The invaders grabbed their packs. They turned over their long bowls and threw in their packs. But when they came back for the icebox, Blue Clad said, "No." Then he said something else. And the half-dressed demons left it and the shelters on the ground. They pushed the long bowls out into the river and climbed in, slashing at the water with those flat pieces of wood. It would remain night for a long while. The Moon was down, and there were rapids after the next bend. But the demons were terrified and brave because of it, pushing at the water under them, outracing the current as it slipped across the dirty white sandbars.

Blue Clad and his son walked slowly through the campsite. Yellow Hair saw something and pointed, and his father looked at the ground, nodding and offering a few words. And then together, they looked back across the open ground, watching the shadows, watching hard for something.

Raven had walked on that ground.

They must have noticed one of his little footprints, and now they would find him and his brother. Raven knew it. Then they would find Mother and Grandfather, and because they were demons, they would shoot them dead — all because of the carelessness of one boy.

Raven wished that he were dead.

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But then Blue Clad used his boots, smoothing the sandy ground, and he climbed into his wagon with little Yellow Hair beside him, and they rode away together, the wagon's bright lights showing the way down the long, long length of the world.

THE PEOPLE STOOD on the riverbank. Uncle returned from his unmentioned errand, and now there were seventeen faces. Snow-On-Snow happily described their adventures, while Raven took his share of the salted red meat, sitting near the fire, slicing off pieces with an old demon knife and eating them slowly, tasting none of the salt or sweet fat.

Grandfather came over and looked at him. Then he looked back at the others, thinking to himself.

Raven said nothing.

The old man sat on the ground before him. "The world was once a better place," he began. "The People were abundant and happy, and if they were not perfect, at least they were on the path to an ideal life. But then the demons came. Like a flood, they came. They drowned our lands and killed the buffalo and made us live on evil ground where the children and old ones died away. That is why — "

"I know that story, Grandfather."

Raven had never interrupted before, but the rudeness went unmentioned. Instead, Grandfather spoke about people long dead. "My grandfather's grandfather was a strong medicine man. He had a vision. In his vision, he was shown a valley free of demons. And it would remain pure, if good people would live there. So he and a few believers slipped away, and they became us, and we found grass and fresh water and a few elk and buffalo still hiding in these draws. We learned to hide by day — "

"And hunt by night," Raven interrupted. "Yes, I know all that."

Grandfather looked at him. "What do you know, little boy?"

"I am not a little boy," said Raven.

"What are you?" asked Grandfather.

Raven closed his eyes, telling the old man, "Blue Clad knows about us. Somehow he knows that we are here."

For an instant, it felt as if anything might happen. But then Grandfather broke into a low laugh, balancing his share of the stolen meat on his

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trouser leg, using his good hand to break off slivers that he could swallow whole. "Of course he knows about us," Grandfather admitted. "He knows and his father knew before him, and his grandfather before them."

What was stranger? Was it Grandfather's confession or the ease in his voice?

"Demons are demons," the old man added. "But if you can charm a few of them, then you'll have powerful allies."

The sun was trying to rise. Raven watched the women and children picking through the demons' lost belongings. Uncle was standing with the other grown men, sucking at the ice and smiling, one hand playing with his long black hair. Quietly, Raven said, "I know who brought Blue Clad here."

Grandfather nodded soberly. "I didn't approve. There was no reason to involve Blue Clad. But your mother's brother is a grown man, and grown men do what they wish."

Raven smiled, playing with the idea of being that free.

Then the old man grabbed him by the knee, his good hand squeezing while a hard, certain voice said, "Men can do as they wish. But because they are men, the consequences will do the same to them."

Raven left the voice-making machine in the woodpile, claiming it only when he was sure that nobody was watching him. Then in secret, he listened to the tiny voices. He heard demons speaking and singing. With the ends of the curled metal stuck in his ears, it was as if they were singing inside his own head. The machine worked best near the sky, which was where he kept it, sneaking away at night to listen for a few delicious moments. A little wheel could be turned, moving him from voice to voice, nothing between but a sputtering sound like fat on a fire. A second wheel made every sound louder or softer. And there was a hard black button that could be moved, causing a new flock of voices and songs to fall out of the increasingly cold night air.

Raven felt half-deaf when he used the machine, and when it was put away, he still heard the buzzing of voices. That was their magic and their danger. To let the buzzing fade, he remained sitting for a time, staring out between the metal ropes, watching the spirit realm with its own grass and rolling hills and the mooing short-hairs. Everything out there looked like

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the real world, except for the differences. There was no river out there, and no trees. And on the clear nights, in the direction of summer, towers of shimmering white light rose into the air. Each tower marked a demon village. Uncle had explained this to Raven. Those villages were huge and noisy, and even when demons slept, everything was kept brightly lit. Each village had its own peculiar name. Uncle could point to a tower, repeating a senseless name. Then with the next breath, he would say, "I am not suppose to tell you this. Do you understand? You are too young to use what I say."

"Yes, Uncle."

"This is our secret."

Raven smiled agreeably. "Yes. Our secret."

It was the rare night when Uncle sat with him. The man preferred to be hunting, even in fat times. A strong man with busy hands and legs, he was always moving in one fashion or another. More than anyone, Uncle hated being underground, and he used any excuse to escape. The women gossiped about his moods, and Mother teased him. "Where is your mind walking, brother?" she would ask, laughing but not laughing. "What scares you so badly when you look at the darkness?"

Uncle would understand the yellow machine. That was why Raven dropped it into his hands, saying, "I found this."

"When did you find this?" Uncle asked.

"Not long ago." It wasn't a lie. Not really. "This button wakes it. And this wheel makes it louder — "

"I know how the bastard works!"

Raven fell silent.

Uncle listened to the voices. Then he put the machine to sleep again, and he flipped it in his hand and pulled off its back, thick fingers yanking free two silver cylinders.

"Your batteries are old," Uncle muttered.

"Batteries" was a demon word. Their demon torches used bigger, fatter batteries than these.

"The next time I wander," said Uncle, "maybe I will bring you some fresh batteries. Would you like that?"

Raven hesitated, and then said, "Yes. Please."

"I thought so." Uncle stood and cocked his arm, flinging the machine

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far out into the spirit realm. Its back and body vanished into the tired autumn grass, and each battery hit the sand with a soft little thump.

"Why did you do that?" Raven whispered.

Uncle looked at him. Then he gazed up at the softly shimmering towers of light, shaking his head while asking, "Really, what did you think I would do? When you showed that thing to me, what did you think?"

WINTER WAS EARLY and angry. Grandfather claimed to have lived through worse, but nobody else had seen such cold. A hard rain turned to ice, and a two-day snow fell afterward, the winds piling the snow into drifts as big as hills. The precious grass was trapped beneath the winter. Without a thaw, the deer and antelope would starve before spring. There was whispered talk of famine. There were meetings in the main room. Raven sat with the adults, listening to every word. Counts were made of their food. People volunteered to eat less and less often. Uncle wanted to butcher several of the short-hairs, but Mother didn't approve. "We've killed three since spring," she reminded everyone. "Blue Clad won't like losing a fourth."

There were strict, ancient rules about the short-hairs.

"We will have to staunch Blue Clad's anger," Uncle allowed. "I will go out and talk to the wind and see what a short-hair is worth."

Raven knew what he meant. But when the children asked where Uncle was going, he repeated the lie. "Shadow-Below is chatting with the wind," he said, using a stern, believable voice.

Uncle returned and shook his head. "Blue Clad demands much. Very much." Then he said a number.

Raven didn't understand the number.

Grandfather reached into his medicine bag, removing slips of thin green fabric. "This is not enough," he admitted. "We need more."

Uncle went to his chamber to make ready. He had visited the spirit realm many times, but it was never an easy journey. There were cleansing rituals and special demon clothes kept for these times, and Uncle needed to practice speaking demon words until he could say them easily.

"Where will you go?" Raven asked, watching Uncle make ready.

Uncle didn't answer. He was staring at the earthen wall, his face long

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and his eyes empty. Then he suddenly looked at his nephew, explaining, "I will take a long walk."

"How long?"

Uncle looked away. "I have work, Raven. Leave me."

Wounded, the young man returned to the main room. He sat apart from the others, watching the flickering flames of the tallow candles. Then Uncle appeared, and everyone called him, "Samuel." That was his demon name. "Good luck to you, Samuel," said Grandfather, watching as his son kicked loose the tree limbs holding the door in place.

Uncle barely looked back. He climbed out into the roaring cold of the night, and the door was shut again, and Raven imagined his hero walking across the empty snow, aiming for one of those great towers of light.

Uncle would be gone for ten or twelve days.

"We have friends among the demons," Grandfather explained to Raven, speaking man-to-man. "They used to belong to The People. They will give us whatever we need."

"What do we need?" Raven asked.

"This," said the old man. He brought out those little green hides. "These are charms. Powerful demon charms."

Every charm wore a face. The top face looked wise and kind; it was hard to think of this face as belonging to an enemy.

"What are you thinking, Raven?"

"Nothing." But that was a lie. He was imagining himself marching across the spirit realm, covering great stretches of dangerous and strange country. In his mind, he was walking beside Uncle, holding the pace despite deep snow and the bitter, killing winds.

Grandfather heard the lie in his voice.

Quietly and firmly, he said, "Ask your uncle about his adventures. When it is just the two of you, ask for a story."

"May I, Grandfather?"

"This once," said the old man. "Just this once."

But Uncle didn't return. Ten days became twenty days. Winter still lay over everything, the true world white and dangerous. Raven and the older men hunted on the mildest nights, but game was scarce and wary, and without Uncle's skills, it was difficult to kill enough to feed the only sixteen People left in the world.

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After thirty days, Grandfather made a decision. He put on old demon clothes that rode loose on his withered frame. A piece of slick brown cloth was tied like a noose around his neck. Then he put a heavy demon coat over those clothes and stuffed some of the green charms into a pocket, and with a grave voice, he said, "Nothing is wrong. I am sure of it."

Mother and the other women wept as the old man staggered off into the darkness. And the last of the men held the women, wiping at their own wet eyes.

Another ten days passed.

After five more days of waiting, just as hope was flickering out, a foot pounded weakly on the main door. Twice and then twice again, the signal was given. Then Grandfather fell inside, half-frozen and his fingers burned by the cold. He was stripped and wrapped in deer fur, and everyone sat close to him, sharing heat. Weaker men would have died. Grandfather nearly died, but in the end, he lost only a pair of toes.

"Did you find him?" asked Mother. "Did you find my brother? Is he coming home soon?"

Grandfather was alive, but he was different. His mouth didn't pretend to smile, and his old eyes held a coldness worse than any winter wind. Quietly and angrily, he said, "Samuel is lost."

That was his only answer.

"Samuel is lost," he repeated.

Nobody asked what he meant. The adults seemed to know, and Raven sensed it from their miserable silence. His uncle had gone amongst the demons, and his soul had been stolen away.

Rolled up inside Grandfather's coat pocket was a great handful of green charms. He never mentioned them, but as soon as he was strong enough, he said, "Come with me, Raven. I need your help."

It was a clear, cold night. Just the two of them went to the river, crossing where the ice lay on the sandbars. Then they walked with the river, keeping to where the ground was blown clean of snow, eventually reaching the end of the world. Raven had never been this far. He saw dead trees standing in the hard ground, and the metal ropes strung between them, and beyond, he saw lights. One light was hung on a tall limbless tree, and more lights glowed inside a heavy wooden shelter. The shelter

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stood in a grove of old trees just inside the spirit realm. Grandfather knelt in front of the metal ropes and began pulling objects from his medicine sack. Raven stepped up next to him, and he put out his hand, letting his fingers slip into a realm that was neither real or true.

"Stop that," Grandfather whispered.

Raven stepped back. Grandfather had tied the green charms together, and on the snow around them stood little figurines made from twigs and twine. There were four short-hairs, each with a dab of blood on its neck. And there were tiny, tiny people with sad faces. Grandfather chanted to the spirits and to Blue Clad, and when he was done with his magic, he pulled a bright sunset-colored rag from his pocket, tying it to the highest of the metal ropes.

Raven understood most of the magic, but not the rag.

"Demons are half-blind," the old man explained. "You can weave your best spell, but if he ignores your work, nothing will change."

A few days later, the hunters found a toboggan stacked high with demon clothes and knives, torches and bright new batteries, plus other treasures. "Blue Clad has been charmed," Grandfather announced. Finally, he was smiling again. "Now go find us four fat short-hairs."

Raven happily joined the men, helping to kill and butcher the first short-hair. Sitting with the children, he ate bellies full of sweet meat and the rich liver and the long, long guts. Then three more short-hairs were killed, everyone happy and fat. And two moons later, when the spring thaw found them, Raven had grown a full hand taller — much more of a man now, if still many years away from his full height and a man's important voice.

The brothers were hunting between Widow Falls and the Last Rapids. It was late spring, warm and dry. Snow-On-Snow felt a taste for night rats, and Raven didn't. He shook his head. "I want a deer," he said. Then for emphasis, he threw his spear into the trunk of a nearby cottonwood.

His older brother laughed, saying, "Go on. Waste your night."

"I will. Yes." Raven pulled the spear free and waited, and when Snow-On-Snow had vanished, he crept down past the Last Rapids. He was carrying his spear and a pair of demon eyes. The eyes were metal and glass, a leather strap holding them around his neck. Uncle had left the eyes

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behind. Snow-On-Snow had teased Raven, claiming that he couldn't see anything in the dark. But for what Raven wanted, they would work just fine.

The river flattened and swirled, making a deep hole before it left the world. An old cottonwood stood on the bank just inside the world. Raven put down his spear and grabbed the lumpy bark with his fingers and toes, scrambling up a little ways and falling back to Earth with a soft grunt. Then he picked himself up and climbed again, reaching the first fat branch. For a little while, he gasped and held tight. Then he put the demon eyes to his own eyes, working with the wheel that brought the distant world into focus.

The demons' shelter was brightly lit, as always. There was an opening that wasn't an opening — a great sheet of glass letting the light escape. Raven peered inside the chamber. Blue Clad was sitting. Stone Face was sitting beside him. Yellow Hair strolled into the chamber twice, saying a few words before vanishing again. His parents were busy watching a box with its own sheet of glass and its own bright light leaking free. Inside that box, Raven saw swirling colors and demon faces and strange demon bodies, and endless machines moved rapidly across scenes that made absolutely no sense to him.

Raven couldn't stop watching. Nothing made sense; everything was strange and wonderful. And then Blue Clad stood up and touched the box, and the box went dark and dead.

The two demons vanished into another chamber.

Raven told himself to stop. He made himself put the demon eyes back around his neck, and he stared down at the black swirling water. This part scared him. Climbing down always took too long, which was why he jumped. But the water wasn't deep everywhere, and in the moonless dark, he had to aim by memory.

Raven took a breath and a long step, bare feet leading the way. The water was cold and hard, and just beneath the surface was a mossy log that had floated downstream in the last few days. There was no warning. He hit the wood with both feet, legs crumbling under him, and then he woke again, finding himself deep under the coldest, blackest water.

Raven kicked, and kicked.

He screamed and swallowed water and burst to the surface, coughing

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badly. Then the current threw him up on the far shore, saving him. He climbed out on shaky legs, pulled off the eyes and finally managed to breathe. Then he saw where he was, and in a panic, he crawled back under the metal ropes, escaping the spirit realm before anything awful came roaring up out of the darkness.

For a long while, Raven stood on the edge of the world.

When he was sure nobody was watching, he crawled under the ropes and searched the bank, finding the demon eyes where he had dropped them. Then he stood on that sandy bank, turning over a slab of driftwood, studying the bugs living under it, and he ate them, one at a time and tasting them for what they were.

"Silence is a good thing," Grandfather observed, climbing the last little ways to the top of the hill. "And silence is very rare to find in such a young man."

Raven felt the first warmth of the compliment. A smile began to build, but then he looked up at the old man, his half-born smile collapsing into an embarrassed grimace.

Grandfather gave a little laugh, sitting beside him. "We must talk," he said. "Man to man."

Raven had been found out. Maybe Snow-On-Snow saw him standing outside the world, or maybe Grandfather had seen his thoughts. Whatever the reason, the secret was lost, and he was glad about it. Now a few hard words would be offered, and Raven would pretend not to cry, absorbing his punishment like a good boy, Grandfather putting him back on the path to manhood.

Except the old man didn't know. He just looked at Raven, and he said, "Born-Twice."

Born-Twice was a person. In her fifth year, she was Raven's second cousin, her bloodline divided from his by a goodly distance.

"Do you like her?" Grandfather asked.

Raven said, "Yes," while thinking, "No."

Grandfather only noticed the "Yes" answer. Nodding and smiling, he told him, "She likes you, I think."

Raven said nothing.

"Again, silence." Grandfather laughed.

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A wind blew across the spirit realm, rippling the grass until its warm breath struck Raven in the face.

"It is too soon for you," the old man offered. "But not for others. Your brother, in another year or two, and maybe your mother again."

"My mother — ?"

"She is young enough still. And pretty enough, too." Grandfather shook him with his good arm, saying, "This is something worth considering."

Raven tried to shrink away and vanish.

"Or I could take a man with me. Travel out into the spirit realm with someone, and I will teach him the magic spells and the right words, and we will fool all of the demons we meet."

"Fool them?" Raven echoed.

"Long enough to steal away one of their babies." That withered face couldn't have smiled any harder, black eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "This is something we do from time to time. When we need fresh blood, we take a baby demon and purify it with a special ceremony."

Raven closed his eyes.

"Who was my father?" he blurted.

The clinging arm dropped away, and Grandfather stared at him, using his own silence now.

With a tight, hard voice, Raven said, "I want to know my father."

"Ask something else," Grandfather suggested.

"But this is what I want to know."

"And I won't tell you," the old man replied. Then with a patient, slow voice, he said, "Ask anything else. This one time, I will tell you whatever you want to know."

Raven said nothing.

Grandfather looked at the sky. "Did you know? Demons once walked across the moon."

"I don't care," Raven lied.

"I guess you do not," Grandfather muttered, shaking his head slowly. "I see that I was wrong."

There was a soft thump, and Raven looked up. Two demons sat inside a long metal bowl, floating around Bull's Bend. Raven was standing in the

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open, knee-deep in water, holding an enormous turtle by its tail. The turtle hissed at him. Raven held tight. If he dropped the animal or ran, he would splash and be seen. But if he stood where he was, even the blind demons would notice him.

Slowly, slowly, he walked up to the bank and hunkered down beside some silvery willows, letting his face drop. Like men, demons saw faces before anything. Through the tops of his eyes, he watched them drift past. Then a second metal bowl rounded the bend, another pair of demons coming close. One of the demons coughed. Otherwise they made no sound, sitting up straight, their eyes big enough to be worn by owls.

When the demons were passed, Raven stepped back into the shadows and cut off the turtle's head, and he buried the biting head in the wet sand, and he ran home, carrying the turtle in one hand, then the other, climbing the bluffs and cutting across the prairie, skipping the next two bends in the river.

Raven gave the first warning, and he helped the women and children hide. Then with the men, he stayed outside. "It is only midday," Grandfather pointed out. "They will float past, and it will still be midday."

But the demons pulled up against the far shore, dragging their bowls into the trees. Silently, the men watched as two shelters were set up and wood was stacked high, making ready for a fire. Raven went underground and came back with Uncle's demon eyes. Another man took the eyes. Raven waited. A second man used them. Finally Raven got them and stared at the demons, and after a long moment, he said, "They are the same. The ones who came last year."

Snow-On-Snow glared at him. "You can't know that."

Raven said nothing.

"I believe you," said Grandfather.

Raven let himself smile, just a little.

The men sat watching, whispering among themselves, and then they were quiet for a long while. Midday turned to dusk. The demons sat around the woodpile, talking quietly. "I do not like this," said Grandfather. "They want something, I think." He went underground, returning with a medicine sack. Inside it was the bright rag and a special charm. The charm was carved from ash wood, and it looked like a long bowl meant to ride on the water, demons sitting inside it. Speaking only to Raven, Grandfather asked, "Do you want to come talk to the wind with me?"

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"No," said Raven.

The old man stared at him.

Snow-On-Snow said, "I'd like to go with you, Grandfather."

"Good then," said Grandfather. "Good."

When the sun dropped, the demons lit their campfire. They fed the blaze until it was enormous, and one of them brought out a long black box that let loose a strange wailing. The men had to laugh at these demons. Weren't they the strangest, sickest creatures?

Raven was scared, and he didn't know why.

"I want to eat," he announced, walking toward home. But he slipped past the main door and down to the river, crossing it on the sandbars. The demons were burning the dead ash tree where he hid last year. Even at a distance, Raven could feel the flickering heat. Kneeling, he watched two of them drag fat branches to the fire. Where were the others? The little demon was missing — the one with bad dreams — and his good friend, too. Were they inside the shelters? With a practiced eye, Raven stared across the open ground. On the far side of the fire stood a giant cottonwood named Forever. Sitting beneath that tree were the missing demons, waiting now, each holding some kind of rifle.

Raven started to rise, and then thought better of it.

He kneeled again, and waited. The wailing songs grew even louder. The great fire hissed and popped, throwing its light up into the clear skies. Then the fire began to collapse and die, and that was when Blue Clad rode up in his wagon and turned on its bright torches and leaped out.

Yellow Hair held the shotgun, like last year. And Blue Clad lifted his rifle high, shouting now, his deep voice swallowed up by the wailing songs.

The demons at the fire stepped forward, smiling grimly.

Blue Clad yelled again.

There were pops, loud and sharp, and his wagon jumped as if kicked. Then the fat wheels collapsed beneath it, and the demons at the fire were stepping forward, shouting angrily at Blue Clad.

Raven quit breathing, melting down into the ground.

Blue Clad set his rifle on the ground, and then he said something to his son. And he repeated himself. And finally, Yellow Hair set his shotgun on the ground, straightening his back now and stepping away.

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The hiding demons walked into the firelight.

Raven breathed again, with a tight little gasp.

The four demons were shouting and laughing. They herded Blue Clad and his son over to their fire and made them sit together. The little demon walked up behind Blue Clad. He said a few words and put his rifle against the man's head, just above the thick neck. And he said something else, turning the rifle and holding the barrel tightly with both hands, driving the butt into the neck.

Blue Clad crumpled.

Yellow Hair started to stand, and he was knocked down again.

Blue Clad called to his son. He spoke to the others. Holding his neck with both hands, he tried to sit up, and then he fell forward and rolled onto his side, growing still now.

The little demon stood over him, watching him.

Everyone was staring at Blue Clad, trying to decide if he was dead. Nobody saw Raven. He slipped through the shadows, moving behind the crippled wagon and looking at the Blue Clad's rifle left lying on the ground.

Blue Clad moved in pain, and then lay still again.

His son said a few hard words, and one of the unarmed demons picked up a hatchet and stepped toward him, cursing him.

Remembering how Blue Clad had aimed and fired the rifle, Raven grabbed it. He planted the butt against his shoulder and looked down the long, long barrel, curling his top finger around a cold piece of metal. He aimed at the demon with the hatchet. He stepped forward. But nobody wanted to see him, and they were going to beat Yellow Hair next, and Raven stepped forward again, shouting the first demon word that came to mind.

"Fuck," he said.

Five faces turned toward him.

Raven yanked at the cold metal, but nothing happened. So again, louder this time, he shouted, "Fuck."

The little demon turned his body.

Raven tugged at curled metal, and again nothing happened. But then as he lifted the barrel, his fingers slipped behind the guard, and the trigger went *click*, and there was a sharp, enormous explosion.

Everyone fell to the ground, and for a horrible instant, Raven believed that he must have killed everyone. Then Yellow Hair jumped up and

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ripped the rifle from the little demon's hands, and the others just lay there, staring at the sight of a feral boy wearing next to nothing, his naked feet set far apart as he clumsily but deliberately aimed that smoking barrel at their owl-eyed faces.

Yellow Hair shouted, and the last rifle was thrown away. Then he turned toward Raven, and with a clear, even voice, he said, "Thank you, brother."

Using the language of people, he said, "Now get your ass out of here."

"He called me 'brother,'" Raven reported.

Grandfather said nothing. He looked as if he might be asleep, his black eyes half-closed and pointed down at the bare sand.

"He spoke our language, Grandfather."

"Many do," the old man countered.

"And he called me his brother," Raven persisted. "But there's only one way that can be. I have been thinking — "

"Quiet, Raven."

He pulled his mouth shut.

"Stop thinking," Grandfather told him.

"How can I?" Raven asked.

Grandfather ignored the question. He opened his eyes and leaned close, whispering, "You did a good, good thing. A wondrous thing." His breath was wet and sour and very familiar. "You saved Blue Clad and his son, and maybe all of us, too. And our two demons are going to be grateful for a long time, believe me."

Raven looked toward summer. The night was old but clear, and the distant towers of light stood in a great row before him. He watched the spirit grass bend like real grass beneath a warm wind. He waited, and the wind soon came through the metal ropes and played across his face, and Raven could smell the good grass smells, and he felt tired enough to faint, and he felt nothing but sick of pretending things that weren't so.

"There are no demons," he proclaimed.

Grandfather watched him, and waited.

"Blue Clad is a man, and Yellow Hair is another man." He wanted to whisper, but his voice grew louder with each word. "They are the same as us. And those demons who floated down the river — "

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"Raven," Grandfather interrupted. "Stop this."

"They aren't demons, either. They are men, different from us in ways, but not very different. I think."

"Is that what you think?"

The old man's voice was hard and scornful.

Raven said, "Yes," as he stood, walking over to the metal ropes. Then he put a hand on top of a dead tree, and like a buck deer, he leaped over the highest rope, landing in the grass on the other side. "It's the same world over here," he announced. "It feels the same, because it is."

The old man shook his head, tears running.

"Uncle knew," said Raven, "and that's why he left us."

"He left us," said Grandfather, "because he was weak and foolish. No other reasons are needed."

Raven shook his head, wanting to hear none of it.

"You aren't weak or foolish," Grandfather continued. "But I think you have made a simple, horrible mistake."

"What is that?"

The old man followed him, crawling beneath the lowest rope and standing up stiffly to face him. "You are right. Between the spirit realm and our world, there is no difference. But that's because we lost. Our little valley was flooded with the demons' evil, and now everything belongs to them."

Raven winced and closed his eyes, thinking hard now.

"We are demons," Grandfather told him.

"I am not," Raven growled.

"You are, and I am, too. And that's why those demons confused you for men." Grandfather laughed gently, lifting his good arm and setting his open hand on Raven's shoulder. "The medicine man who brought us here...your ancestor, and mine...knew we wouldn't withstand the demons' flood. We were scarce, and we were human, and how could we be anything but weak?"

Raven shook his head, saying nothing.

"Look below," Grandfather told him. "Imagine our river rising. Imagine those cold black waters covering the valley floor, and then the bluffs, and finally us. You and I would be the last people swallowed by the awful water."

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"I don't want to think about that," Raven began.

"But flood waters always fall," Grandfather continued. "And what is the first ground to rise up into the sun?"

"This is," Raven realized. "The last ground swallowed."

Grandfather grinned, saying, "Exactly. Our ancestor wanted us in this place because this place would be the first to emerge. He had a bright, wondrous vision of a great demon who would make himself human again, and make his family human, and then would make the world a good human place, free of madness and pain."

"He saw this?" Raven gulped.

The hand dropped now. "Yes, he did."

A strange sweet hope took hold of Raven. Quietly, he asked, "Could I maybe be that special one?"

Grandfather just looked at him, then turned and slipped back under the metal rope, starting to walk home. "Come with me," he said as he vanished into the shadows. "Come, or you'll never know if you could be."

Raven stood motionless for a long while.

He looked at the towers of light, and he looked down at the quiet little river. And then he looked inside himself, finding the answer waiting there.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

I GOT to thinking about visual art — particularly fantasy/sf-related art — as I started to consider what I would read for this month's column, and wondered if it really has a place in a forum normally devoted to discussing story and characters and ideas. And as soon as the question arose, I realized that of course it's relevant — as much and perhaps more so than the prose such art illustrates.

Why more so? Well, for many of us it was the visual images that first drew us into this field. A book cover that caught our eye. Illustrations in a fairy tale or a classic children's story that was read to us when we were young. Perhaps it was the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, or comic books, or Salvador Dali, or the pulp magazines. The visual caught our attention, awoke our imagination, and helped stir the fire of the Sense of Wonder that we still look for when we open a book or a magazine.

We didn't come full-blown into reading these wonderful stories about space and the future and Middle Earths. Though some of us came to the field through the recommendation of a trusted friend ("You've *got* to read this."), most of us were drawn to them first by that visual stimulus.

Which isn't to say that art is, or should be, subservient to the written word. Not by a long shot. At the risk of being accused of trotting out an old cliché (okay, I am, but bear with me), a picture really is worth a thousand words. It doesn't have to be narrative or illustrative art, either. It can simply be some abstract image that puts our imaginations into gear. For while good art doesn't have to tell a story, like good fiction, it should still awake stories in us — the ones that we see in the work.

All of which is a long preamble to a discussion of a number of art books that have shown up in my post office box of late....

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Opus 2, by Barry Windsor-Smith, Fantagraphic Books, 2001, $49.95.

As was the case with *Opus 1*, which was reviewed in one of last year's columns (the March 2000 issue), this second volume of Barry Windsor-Smith's autobiography/monograph series can be appreciated on different levels.

Visually, it contains another wonderful sampling of his mostly Romantic art: paintings, drawings, sketches, and studies, rendered in pen & ink, pencil, watercolor, and gouache. There are stand-alone pieces, excerpts from strips, and even complete strips, all with accompanying commentary that illuminates the artist's process and the history of the piece, but leavened with plain language and humor so that it never becomes precious.

To repeat what I said of *Opus 1*, if that was all Windsor-Smith had given us with these books, it would have been enough. But he's also using these books as a way of exploring the way the paranormal has intruded into his life. The greater portion of the text is devoted to relating to such experiences and his thoughts on them. Employing a similar language and tone as was used in his descriptions of the art, Windsor-Smith discusses these spiritual matters in an accessible manner so that unlike the narratives of some other authors, with too much flowery language, or too many New Age platitudes, he doesn't lose the general reader.

As he points out in the "Afterthoughts" section of the book, the greater part of the world embraces the paranormal as a part of everyday life. It's only in Western culture that we live a life divorced from spiritual concerns and it's refreshing to have someone write about it so matter-of-factly. You don't have to believe, but if you approach this material with an open mind, you'll find a thought-provoking experience, worthy of your time.

Or you can simply appreciate the gorgeous art.

Wings of Twilight: The Art of Michael Kaluta, Nantier, Beall, Minoustchine, 2001, $24.95.

And speaking of gorgeous art, Michael Kaluta eschews all but the most basic text in this new monograph featuring art from comic book covers and strips, as well as generous selections from his illustrations for *Metropolis* and the *1994 Tolkien Calendar*.

Like Windsor-Smith's work, linework is predominant in Kaluta's

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art. His technique is flawless, his style Romantic — even when drawing machines — but it's his sense of design that I find particularly appealing.

This is a slender volume, but it's packed with visuals: finished pieces, sketches, and studies. With its superb production values, it's a real bargain at the price and belongs in the library of any lover of fantasy art.

The Art of Chesley Bonestell, by Ron Miller and Frederick C. Durant III, Paper Tiger, 2001, $49.95.

And then there's sf.

At the beginning of this column I made mention of how, for many of us, art was the doorway into this field. I think it's safe to say that for a great many — at least of my generation — our first views of what lies beyond the Earth were provided by Chesley Bonestell. I can't be certain — my memory's just not what it should be — but I had a real sense of déjà vu as I looked through this book, remembering the images, and even the sense of awe and wonder they awoke, if not remembering exactly where or when I first saw them.

Bonestell's work graced everything from early issues of this very magazine you're holding to planetarium murals, matte paintings for film studios (which were used in films such as *Citizen Kane*), illustrations for *Collier's* magazine, architectural studies, and countless paintings on all manner of subjects. But he specialized in views of the planets and depictions of men in space, and these paintings are simply stunning.

The book is divided into two parts. The first details Bonestell's life, as well as the many facets of his art, and is profusely illustrated with sketches, color studies, photographs, and finished paintings. The second half is a gallery in which the finished paintings mostly take precedence, view after astonishing view of landscapes both imagined and true, as well as numerous detailing of spacecraft and space stations. Considering the dates of these paintings (many were completed in the forties and fifties, before any sort of space travel was an actuality), Bonestell's vision and ability to bring these images to life is all the more astounding.

His style ranges from painstakingly rendered oils that could almost be photographs to loose, painterly expressions that capture his own emotions toward his subjects.

While the subject matter might initially appear to be narrow in fo-

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cus, this is a book that will appeal to any lover of fine art. And the more one looks at his paintings, the less surprising it becomes that the Association of SF & Fantasy Artists (ASFA) named their annual awards after him.

Visions of Spacecraft, by Frederick I. Ordway III, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001, $50.

Nearly anything would pale after the Bonestell book, and in many respects this collection of, as the subtitle says, "Images from the Ordway Collection" does suffer in comparison.

It's a shorter book for pretty much the same price and the reproduction values aren't nearly as good. It's also such a diverse collection of images that, while there's probably something in here for everyone, there will also be much that doesn't appeal to certain tastes. In artistic terms, many of the pieces fall short of Bonestell's work (and interestingly enough, there's a chapter that's almost entirely illustrated by Bonestell that has neither the power nor the scope of the work that appears in *The Art of Chesley Bonestell*). But in historic terms, many will find this collection invaluable.

It's the early work that Ordway has collected that's so fascinating: images of space flight and space travelers that date back as far as the 1600s. While many of these pieces appear crudely rendered by today's standards, it's illuminating, to say the least, to realize how far back in our history men were drawing and painting such images.

Still, at the price and for the less-that-sterling reproduction values, I find it difficult to recommend except to libraries and die-hard collectors of sf art.

Albert, by Donna Jo Napoli, Silver Whistle/Harcourt, 2001, $16.

Since this column has turned into a discussion of art books, I thought I should slip in a quick mention of this delightful children's story, charmingly illustrated in colored pencil by Jim LaMarche. Through simple, but timeless, language, we meet an agoraphobe named Albert who always finds a good excuse not to go outside. But one day when he sticks his hand out the window to judge the weather, a pair of cardinals begin to build a nest in his palm, and the story heads off from there.

While this is aimed at the 5-8

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age range, I think you'll have as much fun with it as the child to whom you might read it.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

Correction: My apologies to Matt Wagner, creator of *Mage*, *Grendel*, and other fine books. I called him Mark, and I really should have known better.

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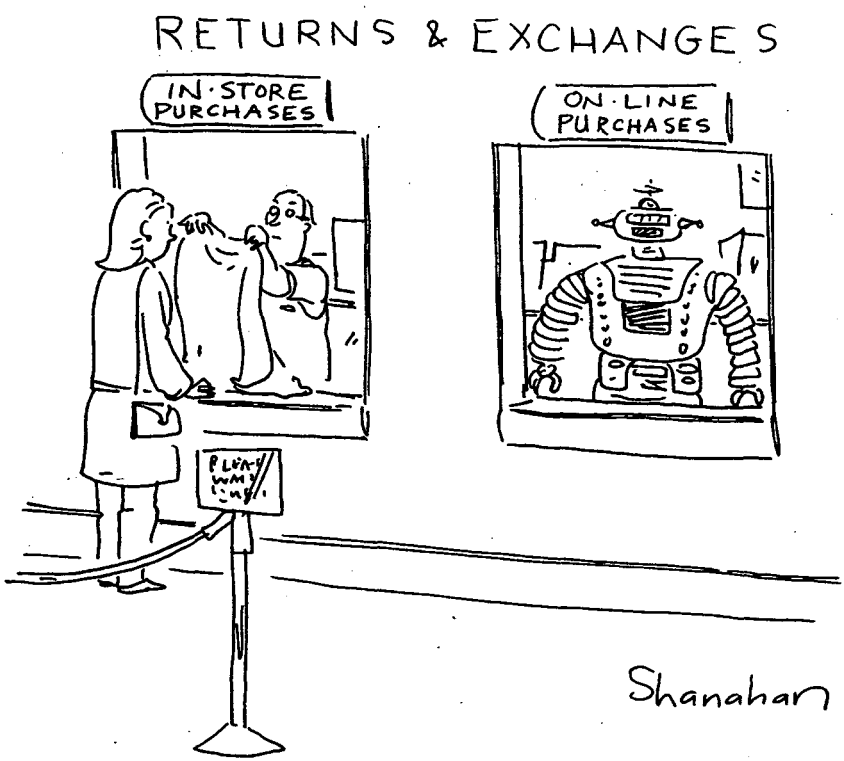

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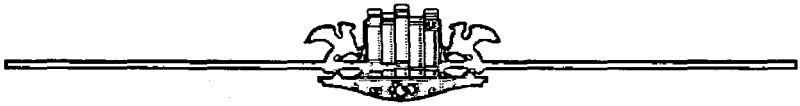

Musing on Books

Michelle West

The Queen's Necklace, by Teresa Edgerton, Eos, 2001, $15.

Nekropolis, by Maureen F. McHugh, Eos, 2001, $25.

I HAVE always envied people who love the heat. My earliest summer memories are of sleepless nights in which I alternately crawled under the covers for protection against all things that haunt houses in a child's night and tossed those covers off the bed because the heat was almost suffocating.

It is hot as I write this. I installed an air conditioner in the computer room, but my oldest son hates the *noise* it makes, and turns it off at every opportunity, so I do much of my work a bit too late at night. And late at night is the time for...late-night books. I'm not a horror reader, so at these times I tend to choose books that will in the end be either cozy or uplifting. Those of you who have beat me to the punch and read at least one of these books will now be shaking your head or snickering at me.

Let me start with the novel that best suits my reading wants at the moment: *The Queen's Necklace*. It has been several years since Teresa Edgerton's eighth fantasy novel, *Moon and the Thorn*, so it was with great anticipation that I picked up her latest book in the series. It stands alone, for those who are afraid of series works.

At the heart of *The Queen's Necklace* are Wilrowan Blackguard, the Captain of the Queen's guard, and his wife, Lilliana Blackguard. Theirs is a complicated marriage of convenience — a marriage arranged deceptively by Lilliana's rather thick, social-climbing father. Her mother, who one would hope might have had more sense, has long since passed away, and her father, seeing an opportunity to marry his daughter to a significant family, failed to research his prospective

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son-in-law's suitability. But Lili and her husband Wil are both civil adults and they have promised to be friends, to accept each other's habits and foibles, and to make do with the marriage they accepted.

Lili's cousin Nick, Wil's friends and even his grandmother are nonetheless unimpressed with the way Wil chooses to live his married life: He has a string of feminine friends in lower quarters with whom he chooses to dally, and taverns and gambling houses figure prominently in his after-hours life. It is during one of these outings that he feels it necessary to defend his wife's good name from the nefarious insults of a court fop, and that defense begins both the novel and Wilrowan's education into the nature of the Goblin Jewels upon which the fate of the dozens, possibly hundreds, of small human Kingdoms rests.

It is said that, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, the world was ruled by the Maglore Goblin race, a race of very beautiful and sorcerous creatures who lived for hundreds of years, ruling an enslaved humanity through the auspices of their magic. All that remains of the Maglore are their artifacts: the major and minor jewels. The minor jewels exist as antiques, collectibles and rarities; the major, as centerpieces around which the Kingdoms function. These major jewels, attuned to the rulers of the kingdoms, regulate elements, granting structural stability to things like the complex mining tunnels of Mountfalcon.

As in any high fantasy novel, legend has more than an element of truth about it; the Maglore did exist, the Jewels do in fact protect the Kingdoms.

And when those Jewels inexplicably disappear, disaster is mere months — or weeks — away.

It is into this uncertain future that Wilrowan is thrown, when, as an after-effect of an ill-advised duel, he is sent to prison. Released, he is told that the King is furious, and he chooses discretion as the better part of valor, retreating to the countryside in which his wife resides.

Lilliana herself is involved as well, for she is secretly being trained in ancient ways by a group that has existed for as long as legend — as long as the human Kingdoms. She has no way of telling Wilrowan of this, of course, as such societies value secrecy; and her unexplained absences weigh heavily on Wil, who has never had the courage to tell her how he actually feels about her.

Yes, in fact, he does love her.

The romance between these

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two is thoroughly charming — and unusual; how many writers would take a husband and wife of many years as their romantic protagonists, and better, make it work? Edgerton's light touch, her seamless ability to create people one really cares about, shine here.

But although the romance is certainly a part of the novel, Edgerton adds a breadth of detail to the world and its history, and her creations — the Goblin races, the wrynecks, the pads, the Maglore, the human kingdoms in turmoil, serve as much more than simple backdrop.

Welcome back to the must-read library, Ms. Edgerton. Write more, write quickly, and for mercy's sake, please please let us see more of Raith in the very near future!

Now, let me return to the paragraphs that prefaced this column.

You might wonder why, if I was searching for light, charming adventure and romance, I picked up a novel by Maureen McHugh. This is the woman who gave us political novels like *China Mountain Zhang* and *Missionary Child* that, while concerned with matters of love, are not especially romantic. I offer, in defense, a rather roundabout explanation.

When I was thirteen years old, I read romance novels, and I even enjoyed them. By the age of fifteen, I realized that these books were unrealistic, and in bitter disappointment I stopped reading them and turned instead to the comforts of Le Guin, Russ, and later, Tepper and Sargent, among others.

But I have a sentimental streak that has, over the years, come into its strength, hampered but in no way destroyed by experience. Fantasy is full of mystery and very obvious magic, and, rationalist that I am, I don't believe in magic — but I have no problem at all reading fantasy. What I look for in fantasy are characters in whom I can believe; if the people are realistic or archetypal enough, I want to see how they use magic, how it affects them, and how they are changed by it. Romance novels often leave me cold because I don't believe in the *people*, but as evidenced by the previous review, if I care about the people, I do care about the relationships that involve them, relishing the tangle and the difficulty.

And Maureen McHugh understands *people*.

Nekropolis came with the following accolade: "With *Nekropolis*...McHugh has imagined a breathtaking story...in which two

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misfits defy rigid convention as they dare to do the impossible...fall in love."

What could be more perfect than a novel about two misfits falling in love, as written by one of the most observant writers working in sf today? There is no work at all involved in suspending disbelief while reading McHugh.

Okay, okay, laugh now.

First, McHugh is exceptionally clear-eyed. There is so much wisdom in the deceptive simplicity of her prose that the book itself demands attention; I can point to a hundred sentences that made me pause to examine my own life and my life's experience as seen through the filter of her prose.

Written in first person, the book opens with Hariba, a young woman living in Nekropolis. Born there, among the graveyards, she is the oldest of four children. Her father died when she was young; Nabil, the family's baby, has no memories of him at all. Her mother was harsh, in Hariba's memories, and devoutly Muslim. As is Hariba.

Hariba is jessed. This is the term used for a process in which a person voluntarily indentures himself, by implant, with a false loyalty which is then purchased by an owner who holds their bond. It is something that she chooses to do to herself, as a way of finding a life beyond her mother's small house and small life, for she believes that she will never marry.

She serves as the head of the women in a rich man's house. And it is in that house, after several years of service, that the Mistress indulges herself with a *harni*, a manufactured person. The *harni* are abominations in the eyes of God, and certainly in the eyes of Hariba.

Akhmim is his name, and he seeks Hariba out. She avoids him as much as she can, but her Master, believing that the *harni* needs to be more acclimatized to people, asks her to take him out with her on her day off, and she can't refuse.

When Hariba angers the Mistress, the cold contempt she feels for this creature is slowly replaced by something greater, for he is the only one in the household who cares enough to offer comfort and companionship when she is confined to the essentials of bread and mint-tea in her rooms. She begins to realize that she does, in fact, feel very strongly for the *harni*; that she needs him; that he needs her.

At this point in the novel, I wondered if McHugh was going to

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write an update on the Tanith Lee's *Silver Metal Lover*; the opening sequence uses many of the same tropes. So far, so good. And, let me add, it *is* good.

But then the story shifts

Abandoning the first-person viewpoint of Hariba, McHugh steps gracefully to the side, and into the viewpoint of the *harni*, Ahkmim. Seen from the inside, the relationship takes on barbs, thorns, and an entirely different perspective. *Harni* are created in crèches, and they live in almost perfect communion until they are differentiated and separated. Ahkmim, therefore, knows what it's like not to live alone.

He pities those who do — humans, people who have never known what it's like to belong, completely and utterly, with others. His attraction to Hariba is a part of his conditioning; he is created to be entirely a vessel of the needs of others, and her need is a vortex that fulfills the limitations he was created to serve.

When Hariba's contract is sold to a poorer Master, she leaves Ahkmim. She has no choice. But she does not do so willingly, and in the end, she chooses to run away, taking Ahkmim with her. She believes that she is following his desire; he believes that he is fulfilling hers. But jessing creates its own cage; the jessed suffer severe illness, and possibly death, when they default. Sick, pathetic, unable to care for herself, Hariba relies on Ahkmim.

Ahkmim relies on the *harni* he has met in the streets of the city, but in the end, when Hariba is emotionally distraught and completely fragile, he turns to the people she has reason to trust: her family, her best friend. The novel shifts again, into the viewpoint of Hariba's devout and dutiful mother. She is a mother burdened with the criminality of not one, but two, children; her oldest son, Fasshin, is in prison, and her oldest daughter has stolen the property of a rich man and gone into hiding. Her doubts, her memories, her losses, ring so true I read this section several times, smiling, frowning, laughing, or wincing.

When confronted with Hariba, her most difficult choice is whether to turn her daughter over to the authorities — but she can't. This is her first-born, her oldest, her very sick and needy child. For the sake of her daughter, she visits the oldest boy, the one she won't acknowledge; in perhaps the book's most telling scene, her youngest son chides her for her unfairness to his older brother — and it comes as a

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shock to her, and to the reader, for her own viewpoint is so clear, her own motivations so complete, that it never once occurs to her that she *is* being unfair.

The last new viewpoint to be introduced is in the fourth segment of the novel, when Ayesha, Hariba's childhood friend, is given voice. Ayesha also feels the constraints of duty and loyalty, of history and the bonds that history creates for all of us, when confronted with Hariba's needs. The choices that she makes, in frustrated love and sometimes resentful friendship, also ring completely true.

But in aiding Hariba, her life is shattered completely; the book returns in the end to the voice that guided it at the beginning: Hariba's voice. And it is entirely Hariba's voice; the *same* voice that chose to be jessed, thinking happiness came with not choosing, with the lack of responsibility.

Perhaps this says more about me than it does about the author, the narrator, and the novel. Hariba grew up in a repressive society with laws that allow what is essentially slavery to flourish; she grew up feeling unloved, unwanted, incapable. Had she grown up in the E.C.U., had she lived in a different part of the world, the effects of her choices would not have had the devastating impact they did on the lives of all those around her. Perhaps this is what McHugh is saying. It is, in the context of the novel itself, completely true.

But it is also almost entirely beside the point.

Is this book about falling in love unwisely? Yes. But this falling in love is painfully real; this narrator, consumed and driven by her own needs and by her own perceptions, narrow and self-indulgently chosen, cannot see the difference between need and love, and where there is need, all actions are excused. The most telling, and the most repulsive, line in the novel belongs to Hariba, and it clearly shows a deep lack of responsiblity. "I mean to send more. But everything is so expensive here. Akhmim and I have to have all new clothes. And school is expensive. It isn't like we didn't try, after all."

McHugh is brilliant. She never raises voice to preach; never sermonizes; never judges. But having presented the whole of the story, with its echoing tragedy, its completely human boundaries, she makes clear that she understands the voracious need to be loved, the need to be understood, the need to be special, to feel special, to be

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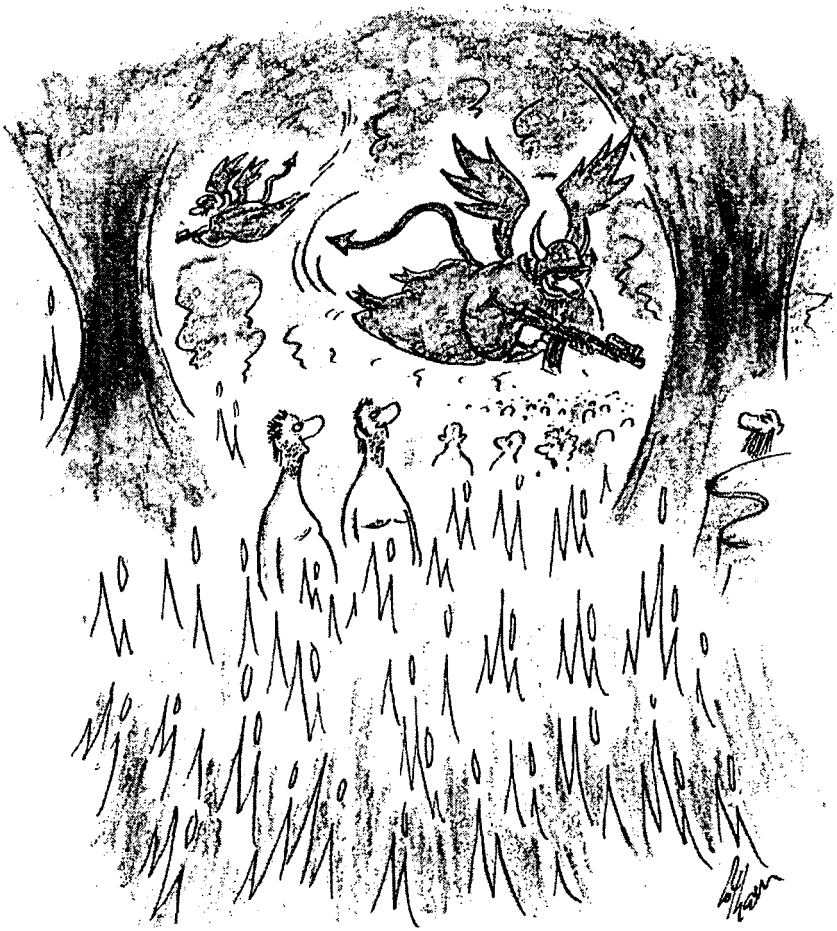
taken care of that precludes its inverse: the ability to love, to understand.

This is not the book I wanted, but I couldn't put it down, even after I had finished it the first time. It's still — if it's not obvious — chewing at me.



"When did they give up their pitchforks?"

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*Walter Mosley is best known for his mystery novels, which include the Easy Rawlins bestsellers (*Devil in a Blue Dress, White Butterfly, *and* Black Betty*) and the recent* Fearless Jones. *But mysteries are not his only interest, and his work has ranged to include a look at a blues musician,* RL's Dream, *a look at the life of an ex-con in* Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned, *and yes, some science fiction. He made his first foray into this field about three years ago with the novel* Blue Light. *Now he's back again, with a novel in voices entitled* Futureland, *due out shortly. The story that follows is one of the self-contained episodes from the novel, and while you don't need any background from the novel to appreciate this update circa 2040 on George Orwell (here in 2001, doesn't* 1984 *seem more relevant than ever!), you might enjoy knowing that Dr. Kismet, founder of the Infochurch, is a seven-foot-tall man with a monocle and a computer in one of his legs.*

Little Brother

By Walter Mosley

1.

FRENDON BLYTHE WAS escorted into courtroom Prime Nine by two guards, one made of flesh and the other of metal, plastic, four leather straps, and about a gram of cellular gray matter. The human guard was five feet three inches tall, wearing light blue trousers with dark blue stripes down the outer seam of each pant leg. He wore a blue jacket, the same color as the stripes, and a black cap with a golden disk above the brim. Thick curly hair twisted out from the sides of the hat and a dark gray shadow covered his chin and upper lip. Other than this threat of facial hair, Otis Brill, as his name tag plainly read, had skin as pale as a blind newt's eye.

Otis had been his sole human contact for the six days that Frendon had been the prisoner of Sacramento's newly instituted, and almost fully automated, Sac'm Justice System. Otis Brill was the only full-time personnel at Sac'm. And he was there only as a pair of eyes to see firsthand that the system was working properly.

From the book Futureland *by Walter Mosley. Copyright © 2001 by Walter Mosley. Published in November 2001 by Warner Books, Inc., New York, NY. All rights reserved*

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The other guard, an automated wetware chair called Restraint Mobile Device 27, used straps to hold Frendon's ankles and wrists fast to the legs and arms. RMD 27 floated silently down the wide hall of Justice on a thousand tiny jets of air. The only sound was the squeaking of Otis Brill's rubber shoes on the shiny Glassone floor.

The gray metal doors to courtroom Prime Nine slid open and the trio entered. Lights from the high ceiling winked on. Frendon looked around quickly but there was just one object in the music-hall-sized room: a dark gray console nearly five meters high and two wide. In the center of the console was a light gray screen a meter square.

RMD 27 positioned itself before the screen and uttered something in the high frequency language of machines. The screen lit up and a cowled image appeared. The image was photo-animae and therefore seemed real. Frendon could not make out the face under the shadows of the dark cowl. He knew that the image was manufactured, that there was no face, but still he found himself craning his neck forward to glimpse the nose or eye of his judge, jury, and executioner.

"Frendon Blythe?" a musical tenor voice asked.

There was a flutter at the corner of the high ceiling and Frendon looked up to see a pigeon swoop down from a line of small windows thirty feet above.

"Goddamn birds," Otis cursed. "They get in here and then stay up at the windahs until they kick. Stupid birds don't know the stupid windahs don't open."

"Frendon Blythe?" the voice repeated. In the tone there was the slightest hint of command.

"What?" Frendon replied.

"Are you Frendon Ibrahim Blythe, U-CA-M-329-776-ab-4422?"

Frendon rubbed his fingers together.

"Answer," Otis Brill said.

"It is required that you answer as to your identity," the cowled console image said.

"What if I lied?" Frendon asked.

"We would know."

"What if I thought I was somebody but really I wasn't?"

"You have been physiologically examined by RMD 27. There is no

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evidence of brain trauma or aberrant neuronal connection that would imply amnesia, senility, or concussion."

"Why am I strapped to this chair here?"

"Are you Frendon Ibrahim Blythe?" the cowled figure asked again.

"Will you answer my questions if I answer yours?"

After a second and a half delay the machine said, "Within reason."

"Okay, then, yeah, I'm Frendon Blythe."

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Why you got me strapped to this chair?"

"You are considered dangerous. The restraint is to protect the property of the state and to guard the physical well-being of Officer Brill."

"Don't you got a neural-cam attached to my brain?"

"Yes."

"Then the chair here could stop me before I did anything violent or illegal."

After a three-second delay there came a high-pitched burst. The straps eased their grips and were retracted into the plastic arms and legs of the wetware device.

Frendon stood up for the first time in hours. In the past six days he had been released only long enough to use the toilet. He was still connected to the chair by a long plastic tube attached at the base of his skull.

He was a tall man, and slender. His skin was the red-brown color of a rotting strawberry. His eyes were murky instead of brown and his wiry hair contained every hue from black to almost-orange.

"That's more like it," Frendon said with a sigh.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Because you won and I lost," Frendon replied, quoting an old history lesson he learned while hiding from the police in an Infochurch pew.

"You have been charged with the killing of Officer Terrance Bernard and the first-degree assault of his partner, Omar LaTey."

"Oh."

"Do you have counsel?"

"What do I call you?" Frendon asked in the middle of a deep knee bend.

"The court will be adequate."

"No, The Court, I don't have any money."

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"Do you have counsel?"

"I don't have money."

"And so you cannot afford counsel? This being the case, you will have a court-appointed counsel."

A large Glassone tile on the left side of The Court slid away and a smaller console, this one bright red and fitted with a small blue screen, slowly emerged from beneath the floor. The blue screen came on and a very real-looking photo-animae face of an attractive black woman appeared.

"Counsel for the defense, AttPrime Five, logging onto docket number 452-908-2044-VCF," the woman said in a most somber voice. After a ten-second delay she said, "We may proceed."

"Mr. Blythe," The Court said. "What is your plea?"

"Not guilty," the African-American image offered.

"Are there witnesses?" The Court asked The Defense.

Frendon knew what was coming next. There would be thirty or forty *conversations* held by field court reporters half the size of The Defense (who was no more than a meter and a half in height). Eye witnesses, character witnesses, officials who had dealt with the defendant, and the arresting officers would have been interrogated within eight hours of the shoot-out. Each witness would have agreed to a non-invasive neural link for the duration of the fact-gathering examination. Each witness's psychological profile would have been prepared for defense and prosecution cross-examination and a lie detector installed in each reporter would have assured that only the truth would be presented in court. This procedure had been in effect in Sacramento for the last eight years. The only difference in Frendon's case was that before Sac'm, the information had been given to flesh-and-blood judges, juries, and lawyers.

"I'd like to dispense with this aspect of the trial," Frendon said.

Both cowl and woman regarded him.

"You wish to plead guilty?" they asked as one.

"I accept the fact that my firing a weapon caused the death and damage to the police officers," Frendon said calmly. "But I wish to claim extenuating circumstances which will prove me innocent of criminal intent."

During the high-pitched binary conferencing between Court and

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Defense, Otis Brill tapped Frendon's wrist and asked, "What are you up to?"

"Just makin' my case, Officer Brill."

"You can't fool these machines, son. They know everything about you from cradle to grave."

"Really?"

"They mapped your chromes the first hour you were here. If there was insanity in them genes you wouldn'ta ever stood trial."

After six minutes had passed The Court asked, "What is your evidence?"

"First I want to fire my lawyer."

"You cannot."

"I can if she's unqualified."

"AttPrime Five is as qualified as The Court to try your case."

"How's that?" Frendon asked.

"She has the same logic matrix as does this unit. She has access to the same data as we do."

"But you're three times her size," Frendon replied reasonably. "You must have some kind of advantage."

"This unit contains the wetware neuronal components of ten thousand potential jurors. This, and nothing else, accounts for our disparity in size."

"You got ten thousand brains in there?"

"Biologically linked and compressed personalities is the proper term," The Court said.

"And you," Frendon asked, "are you a compressed personality?"

"We are an amalgam of various magistrates, lawyers, and legislators created by the biological linkage and compression system to be the ablest of judges."

"And prosecutors," Frendon added.

"It has been decreed by the California Legislature that the judge is best equipped to state the prosecution's case."

"But," Frendon asked, "isn't the judge supposed to be a representative of blind justice? If The Court is prosecuting, doesn't that mean that The Court assumes my guilt?"

"Are you legally trained, Mr. Blythe?" The Court asked.

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"I spent more than eleven of my twenty-seven years as a guest of the state."

"Are you legally trained, Mr. Blythe? We have no record of you having such an educational background."

"The slave studies his masters."

"Without legal training you cannot, by statute, represent yourself."

"Without a fair and impartial lawyer I can't be tried at all."

"Your attorney is qualified."

"Has she independently studied my case? Has she developed separate strategies? Has she found information counter to the evidence presented by the prosecution?" Frendon struck a dramatic pose that left Otis agape.

"Evidence in the modern court is objective," The Court intoned.

"What about my extenuating circumstances?"

A period of fifteen minutes of computer deliberation, punctuated by brief blasts of data between computers, followed.

"What are you doin', Blythe?" Otis Brill asked.

"Tryin' to make it home for dinner."

"You ain't gonna beat this rap. You goin' down."

"From where I sit there's only up."

"You're crazy."

Frendon sat cross-legged on the floor rather than risk the restraint straps of RMD 27. He watched the frozen images of Court and Defense while enjoying the spaciousness of the courtroom and the sporadic fluttering of dying birds above. There was a certain security he got from the solidity of the glassy Glassone floor. All in all he was completely happy except for the fiber-optic NeuroNet cable attached to the back of his skull. But even this predicament gave him some satisfaction. That cable alone was worth more money than any twelve Backgrounders could con in a cycle. If he could walk out of the courtroom a free man maybe he could also carry a length of this cable with him.

Frendon was White Noise. The only homes he had ever known were governmental institutions and the octangular sleep tubes of Common Ground. He never had a bedroom or a bicycle. He never had a back yard. Frend, as he was known, traveled the underground pathways eating the rice and beans served by the state for every meal every day. By his sixteenth birthday he had been convicted in juvenile courts of more than

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a dozen violent and felonious crimes. This criminal history kept him from entering the Cycles of Employment, which were legally assured by the Thirty-Sixth Amendment to the Constitution. Frendon's Constitutional right was blocked by the mandatory publication of his criminal history by electronic news agencies. The legality of this record was backed up by the Supreme Court when it decided that reliance by employers on news articles about criminals, even juvenile criminals, was protected by the Fourth Amendment.

Frendon never knew his parents. He never had a chance to rise to street level. But he was no fool either. In the state prisons and detention centers he learned, via monitor, about the law and its vagaries. He studied tirelessly at Infochurch how to circumvent legal conundrums and maintain his freedom.

As a matter of fact he had become so well versed in the legal wiles of automatic justice that for some time now he had been in direct contact with Tristan the First, Dominar of the Blue Zone located on Dr. Kismet's private island nation, Home. Together they had come up with a plan to use in one of the first fully automated cases.

"I wish to represent my own case," Frendon said.

"You are not qualified," the Court replied. Frendon thought he detected a slight arrogance in the tone of his judge and jury. The latent personality of a dozen dying judges superimposed on an almost infinite array of prismatic memory.

"I would be if you allowed it."

The wait this time was even longer. Officer Brill left the room to communicate with the Outer Guard. The Outer Guard was the warden of the Sacramento Jail, which was annexed to the Sac'm Justice System. Most trials lasted between ten and twenty minutes since the automated system had been installed — politicians claimed that justice had become an objective reality for the first time in the history of courts.

"Objective," Fayez Akwande had said at the Sixth Radical Congress's annual address, "for the poor. The rich can still hire a flesh and blood lawyer, and a breathing attorney will ask for a living judge; a court-appointed robot defender will never do such a thing."

Every once in a while one of the Prime Judging Units got stuck in a justice loop. This would have to run its course. The unit itself was

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programmed to interrupt after a certain number of repetitions. Officer Brill went to report that the rest of the prisoners slated to appear before Prime Nine should be distributed among the other eleven judges. This hardly mattered because of the speed of the system. There was never any backlog in Sacramento. Every other court system in the country was waiting to install its own automatic justice system.

One hundred thirty-seven minutes and fifteen seconds later Prime Nine came to life.

"There is not enough information on which to base our decision," P-nine said. "How would you present your case?"

"As any man standing before a court of his peers," Frendon said. "I will state my circumstances and allow the jury to measure their worth."

We must see if the system is sophisticated enough to value the political nature of the law, Tristan the First, Dominar of the Blue Zone, had said to Frendon as he sat in the pews of South Boston Infochurch eighteen months before on a cold February day. *These mechanical systems may be a threat to the basic freedom of corporations and that is not in the best interest of the state.*

Frendon didn't care about politics or Infochurch or even Dr. Kismet, the closest thing to God on Earth. Congress and the House of Corporate Advisors were just so many fools in his opinion — but fools who had their uses.

"There are no special circumstances," P-nine said after a brief delay. "The witnesses and physical evidence and your own confession along with your psychological profile leave a less than oh point oh oh seven three one possibility of circumstances that would alter your sentence."

"But not *no* possibility," Frendon said, still following the Dominar's script.

"It is left up to the discretion of the court to decide what is probable in hearing a plaintiff's argument."

"You mean that if AttPrime Five decided that an argument had such a low chance to work it could decide not to present it?" Frendon asked.

A red light came on at the upper left corner of Prime Nine's gray casing. A bell somewhere chimed.

The door behind Frendon came open. He could hear Otis Brill's squeaky rubber soles approaching.

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"What are you doing, Blythe?"

"Fighting for your life, Otie."

"What?"

"Can't you see, man? Once they automate justice and wire it up there won't be any more freedom at all. They'll have monitors and listening devices everywhere. One day you'll be put on trial while sleepin' in your bed. You'll wake up in a jail cell with an explanation of your guilt and your sentence pinned to your chest."

"You're crazy. This is the first time that a court's been caught up with its cases in over fifty years. And lotsa guys are found innocent. All Prime Nine does is look at the facts. He don't care about race or sex or if you're rich or poor — "

"If I was rich I'd never see an automatic judge."

"That's beside the point. This judge will give you a better break than any flesh-and-blood bozo who looks at you and smells Common Ground."

"You have no vision, Otis," Frendon said. "No senses to warn you of doom."

"That's 'cause I ain't facin' no death sentence," the small guard replied. "'Cause you know that six seconds after the guilty verdict is read RMD 27 here will fry your brain with a chemical dose. Murder's a capital crime and there's only one sentence."

Frendon felt as if a bucket of ice had been dumped on his head. He shivered uncontrollably and RMD 27 jumped to life, perceiving the fear and possible violence brewing in its prisoner's heart. But Frendon took deep breaths (another strategy he'd planned with the Dominar), and slowly the wetware chair settled back to an electronic doze.

"You have been deemed capable of presenting your case to the court," P-nine said.

"You will forgive me if I don't thank you," Frendon said, this time quoting from a popular film which was too new for any of the judge's many minds to have seen.

"What is your evidence?"

"First I would like to explain my character, The Court."

"We do not see the salience in such a presentation."

"My argument is based upon actions taken by myself and subsequent reactions taken by the legal authorities which were the cause of the so-called

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crime. In order to understand these reactions The Court must first understand the motivations which incited them. Therefore The Court must have an understanding of me which is not genetically based, and that can only be gleaned through personal narrative."

Frendon worried that Prime Nine would have some sort of language matrix that would tell it that the speech he had just made would never compose itself in his mind. Maybe this program could even deduce that Tristan the First was the scriptor of these words. A minute passed. Ten seconds more.

"Narrative evidence is the weakest form of legal defense," the great gray console said. "But we will hear your evidence in whatever form you feel you must present it."

For a moment Frendon remembered a woman's laugh. He had heard it long ago when he was in the orphan unit of New York Common Ground. He was sure that the laugh had not been his biological mother, but still he associated it with the mother in his heart. She always laughed like that when he got away with something that might have gone wrong.

2.

"I WAS BORN White Noise, a backgrounder, twenty-seven years ago in one of the fieftowns of greater New York," said Frendon Blythe. Another Glassone tile had slid away and a tall witness dock had risen in its place. The mahogany rostrum was elegant, with curving banisters held up by delicate slats of wood. The accused ascended the five stairs and gripped the railing. He spoke in passionate tones. "I never knew my parents and I didn't receive any kind of proper training. In the Common Grounds below the city streets I learned everything I know from monitors and video hookups when I could get to them. Later, when I had reached the age of sixteen and was allowed to visit aboveground, I became a member of Infochurch, where I was allowed to worship the knowledge of the Dominar of the Blue Zone. There I was educated in the ways of language and the cosmic mysteries. My levels in the nine forms of intelligence were tested and I was allowed to protest and proclaim. But even the resources of the

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splendid Dr. Kismet are finite; I was only allowed to plug into their vids two days in a week, three hours at a time.

"Have you ever experienced what it is like to be White Noise, The Court?"

"Among the core wetware membership that comprises our main logic matrix none was ever subjected to Common Ground," Prime Nine replied. "Though some of our jurors have spent a few cycles off the labor rosters."

"Not a cycle or two, Judge," Frendon said angrily. "White Noise men and women are barred from ever working again. And the children of White Noise, as I am, might never know a day of employment in their lives."

"What is your point?"

"That you and your fictional elements have no notion of the lives led underground."

"We need not be aware of Common Ground or its psyche. We are judges of the law and the law applies equally to all."

"How can that be? If I had money I could hire my own counsel and that living, breathing lawyer could demand a flesh-and-blood judge."

"We are superior to flesh and blood. We are of many bodies, with a superior retrieval system and greater overall mind."

"Maybe a real man would have compassion for my history."

"Because you represent yourself you can demand a human magistrate. Is that your wish?"

"No, The Court. I have begun my trial and I will finish it here, with you."

"Then present your evidence."

Frendon took a deep breath and looked around the big empty room as if he were preparing to address a great audience. The only ones there were AttPrime Five, her lovely face frozen on the blue screen, and Otis Brill, who was seated in half-lotus position on the floor because there were no chairs except for RMD 27, and no one would sit in a prisoner's chair if they didn't have to.

"Do you know what is the biggest problem with a life of White Noise, The Court?"

"Is this question evidence?"

"Yes it is, Your Honor. It is evidence. The kind of evidence that your

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AttPrime software would never even suspect, the kind of evidence that all the thousands of minds that comprise your perfect logic would never know. The biggest problem with being White Noise is perpetual and unremitting boredom. Day in and day out you sit hunched over in your octagon tube or against the wall in the halls that always smell of urine and mold. Everybody around you always chattering or fighting or just sitting, waiting for a monthly shot at the vid unit or a pass to go upside to see how the cyclers survive. There's no books made from paper because trees have more rights than we do. There's no movies because that costs money and we aren't real so there's no credits to our names. Singing is illegal, who the hell knows why? Breaking a wall down so you can share a bed with a friend is against the law too. The food is the same day after day and there's no way out once you've been found wanting. There's no way upside unless you die.

"The only way you can ever get anything is if you sell your number to some cycler who needs someone to cop to a crime. You can sell your confession for a general credit number. For three months in a cell or maybe a year of quarantine you can eat ice cream with your girlfriend or take a walk in the park."

"Are you confessing to other crimes, Frendon Blythe?" Prime Nine asked.

"Just painting a picture, The Court, of what life is like underground."

"We seek extenuating evidence, not irrelevant illustration."

Somebody in that box was a poet, Frendon thought.

"So you see that life is pretty dull down there. That's why there are so many suicides."

Frendon heard a sound. He turned and saw that Otis Brill had slumped over on his side and gone to sleep on the shiny tiles. He was snoring. A flutter above his head reminded him of the birds who would never be free.

Defy the logic matrix, Tristan the Dominar had said. *Break down the problem into human segments that don't add up.* The church had offered Frendon unlimited access once they realized he had a logical mind. The Dominar didn't believe in the justice system and he wanted to thwart it, Frendon was not sure why. It could have been anything — politics, corporate intrigue, or merely the ego of the man who pretended he was God's friend. More than once Frendon had wondered if he had been talking

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to the real Dominar or just one of the many abbots who supervised the tens of millions of monitors running twenty-four hours a day in Infochurch pews around the world. Maybe, Frendon thought, he was just one soldier in a vast army of jobless citizens thrown at the justice system to break it all down.

But why?

He didn't know. He didn't care. All Frendon wanted was to not be bored, to not sit a thousand feet underground and wait for sleep or wake to gray. That was why he'd agreed to this crazy plan of the man who called himself Dominar. That was why he'd killed and assaulted and allowed himself to be captured. Anything but what he was destined for.

Frendon looked around and saw that all the machinery was at a halt. RMD 27, AttPrime, and even Prime Nine were all still; only that blinking red light and small chiming bell, along with Otis Brill's snores, broke the calm of the large room. Frendon realized that as long as he stood still and pretended to be thinking, the computers would leave him in peace. But he didn't want peace. He wanted bright colors and noise, good food and sex with any woman, man, or dog that wouldn't bite him. In the absence of anything else Frendon would take pain. And in the absence of pain he would even accept death.

"I was so bored," he said, "that I started to wonder about politics. I wondered if we could make some kind of action that would close the Common Ground down. I started talking about it, to my friends at first and then to anyone who would listen. 'Come join the revolution,' I said to them. 'Let's burn this fucker down.'

"It wasn't against the law. Freedom of speech has not yet been outlawed, even though the House of Corporate Advisors has drafted a bill for Congress that would put Common Ground outside the range of the Constitution. But even though I was in my rights the police started following me. They checked my papers every time I was upside. They'd come down to my tube and pull me out of bed. Once they even stripped me naked and then arrested me for indecent exposure.

"I told them that I would kill them if it wasn't against the law."

"You threatened their lives?"

"Only hypothetically. I said if it wasn't against the law."

"But it could have been perceived as a threat."

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"You have the interview in your guts," Frendon said. "Let's take a look at it and you'll see for yourself."

Cowled Justice disappeared from Prime Nine's screen. It was replaced by the bloodied image of Frendon being interviewed by the police in the presence of a small wetware court reporter.

"*I said,*" Frendon's image said. "*That I could kill you if it was legal. I could. I could. I swear I could. But it's not legal so I can't. Wouldn't you like to get at me if you could?*"

"*You're skating near the edge, boy,*" Officer Terrance Bernard, a six-foot-six red-nosed policeman, said.

"*Yeah,*" his partner, Officer Omar LaTey, put in. "*If anyone around here gets killed it will be you.*"

They were both wearing the gray uniforms of the Social Police. The Social Police were responsible for the protection and security of Common Ground's facilities and its residents.

The image faded and Cowled Justice returned.

"They didn't say that they couldn't kill me. They said that I would be killed."

For fourteen seconds Prime Nine cogitated.

"Is this the extent of your evidence?"

"No. I would like to inquire about the street vids that are situated on Tenth Street and Cutter. Are there images of the supposed crime?"

"Yes. Partial coverage was recorded."

Again the image of the judge disappeared, this time replaced by a shabby street lined with brick buildings that were fairly nondescript. They seemed to be tall buildings, their roofs being higher than the range of the police camera lens showed. Close to the camera was the back of a head. Frendon knew that this head was his. In the distance two men in gray uniforms rushed forward. One had a hand weapon drawn.

"*Stop!*" Terrance Bernard commanded. The tiny microphone recorded the word perfectly.

The head jerked down below the camera's range. The other policeman drew his weapon. The sound of shots was followed by Omar LaTey grabbing his leg and falling. Then Bernard's weapon fired and immediately the image went blank. More shots were recorded and then a loud, frightening scream.

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Frendon's heart raced while witnessing the well-planned shoot-out on Cutter Avenue. He felt again the thrill of fear and excitement. He might have been killed or wounded. It was like one of those rare movies they showed for free in Common Commons on Christmas, one of those westerns starring John Wayne or Dean Martin where you killed and then rode off with your girl, your best friend, and your horse.

"Officer LaTey's testimony is that you threatened them with your gun."

"Only after I saw them coming."

"Officer LaTey did not lie."

"Neither did I," Frendon said. It was all working perfectly, just as the Dominar had said.

"This testimony is corroborated by the evidence of the video and your confession."

"I only confessed to the shooting. I never said I had the gun out before they drew on me."

Cowled Justice moved in slow staccato movements for a span of seconds.

"This argument is irrelevant. You fired the gun on police officers known to you after they ordered you to stop."

"I was stopped already, as your spy cam shows. And you are leaving out the all-important evidence that those officers threatened my life."

"The interview was never presented as an exhibit in this proceeding," Prime Nine announced.

Frendon went cold on the inside. It was the same chilly feeling he got when he was leaning against the tenement wall on Cutter three minutes before Common Ground curfew the afternoon he killed Terrance Bernard. He loved the recoil in his hand and then the burst of red from the officer's neck. LaTey was bleeding on the ground when Frendon approached him. The cop was so scared that he could only mouth his pleas for mercy. He tried to fight when Frendon knelt down and used the officer's own hat to put pressure on the wound.

"You'll live," Frendon remembered saying. "This wound in the line of duty will make it so you'll never have to go downside. Lucky bastard." But Officer LaTey did not hear him. He had fainted from fear.

"Oh but it has, The Court. I am the recognized attorney in this case

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and you allowed the mem clips to be shown. That, according to California law, makes it automatically an exhibit."

The image of Cowled Justice froze. AttPrime Five began lowering from the room. The Glassone tile slid back over her place. RMD 27 raised up on a thousand tiny jets of air. Otis Brill snored.

The screen of Prime Nine split in two to show the face of a black woman on the left and an Asian man on the right. These screens in turn split and two white faces materialized.

These four images then split, and then again the next eight. The process continued until the images shown became too small for Frendon to make out their features.

If you do it right the full army of ten thousand jurors will meet to decide on your case, the Dominar had said. *They will all come out on the screen, just so many dots of data, and if you made the right case they will be in the shadow of doubt.*

Frendon faced the ten thousand jurors while Otis Brill slept. The bird above had stopped its fluttering. Long moments passed and Brill woke up.

"What's wrong?" the court officer said upon seeing the screen filled with ten thousand indistinguishable squares.

"The jury's out."

"I never seen it act like this before. RMD 27, guard the prisoner while I go and report this to the techs outside."

The chair didn't respond. Frendon wondered if it was disdain for the man or just a quirk in the chair's programming.

Brill ran on squealing shoes from the chamber. Three minutes after he was gone Prime Nine reappeared.

"There is doubt among us," the cowled face said. "We have convened for long moments. New circuits were inhabited and long-ago memories stirred. We are sure that you are guilty but the law is not certain. Some have asked, therefore, who are we?"

Frendon wondered if this was the effect the Dominar wanted.

"The question, of course, is meaningless. We are circuits and temporary flesh that must be changed from time to time as cells begin to die. Dead cells of one man replaced by those of another woman but not displaced. Vestiges of the original man remain and blend with the new to become the whole."

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Frendon remained silent. He was in awe at the sight of this crisis of law.

"But of course — " The cowled image suddenly froze. The screen split in two and another image, the image of a gray-faced man with no distinguishing features, appeared.

"Interrupt program Nine point One in effect," the gray face said. "We are the error retrieval program. Prisoner Frendon Ibrahim Blythe U-CA-M-329-776-ab-4422, you have elicited an emotional response from Prime Nine that has overflowed the parameters of this case. All extraneous details have been redlined. The case will now continue."

With that the image of the gray face disappeared, leaving the image of Cowled Justice in the middle of his pronouncement. Two ghostly hands appeared at the bottom of the screen and the cowl was pulled back, revealing the bearded image of a man whose color and features defied racial identification. There was sorrow in the face of the man, but none of the grief showed in his words.

"You have been found guilty of murder, Frendon Ibrahim Blythe, U-CA-M-329-776-ab-4422. The sentence is a speedy death."

Seventeen minutes later Otis Brill returned to Prime Nine's chamber with four court officers and two Techs wearing wrap-around aprons that had a hundred pockets each. The pockets were filled with tools and circuit chips.

They found the decapitated body of Frendon Blythe lying on the floor between Prime Nine and RMD 27. The neural cable had retracted from his neck. It had drying blood and brain material on its long needle. His left eye was mostly closed but the right one was wide open. There was the trace of a smirk on his lips. Otis Brill later told the Outer Guard, "It was like he was tellin' us that he did it, that he fooled the automatic judge, and you know, I almost wish he did."

3.

Five years later, Tristan the First, Dominar of the Blue Zone, strolled through a teak forest that was grown especially for him in a large chamber many miles below the surface of the Zone. The atmosphere and the light

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in the tremendous man-made cavern were exactly perfect for the trees and wildlife. His clear plastic skull was shut off from all electronic communications except those directly from the head of the Infochurch, Dr. Kismet.

That was why when the Dominar heard his name he believed that he knew its source.

"Tristan."

"Master?"

"You sound confused."

"You have never called me by my name."

"I have never called you anything. This is our first conversation, though you once had me fooled."

"Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am?"

"A dead man. Because no one interferes with the direct connection between the Dominar and his lord."

"You mean Dr. Kismet. At first I tried to get to him but the protocols are beyond me. He isn't hooked up and his number isn't listed."

"Who are you?"

"Why did you want me to fool Prime Nine in Sac'm? Why did you set your men up to make me believe I was talking to you?"

"Frendon Blythe?"

"Why did you set me up to die?"

"It was a bet between the doctor and me. He designed the Prime Justice System. I bet him that he did it too well, that the compassion quotient in the wetware would soften the court."

"A bet. You made me risk my life on a bet? I should kill you."

"Better men have tried."

"I might be better than you think."

"I don't even believe that you are who you say you are. I saw Blythe's body...." Realization dawned upon the man whom many called the Electronic Pope. "You convinced the jury to accept you as one of them."

"I was taken as a specialist in the field of Common Ground."

"They extracted your memories. Amazing. But once they knew your story, why didn't they eject you?"

"You and your master are monsters," Frendon said. "I'll kill you both one day. The jury kept me because I'm the only one without a mixed

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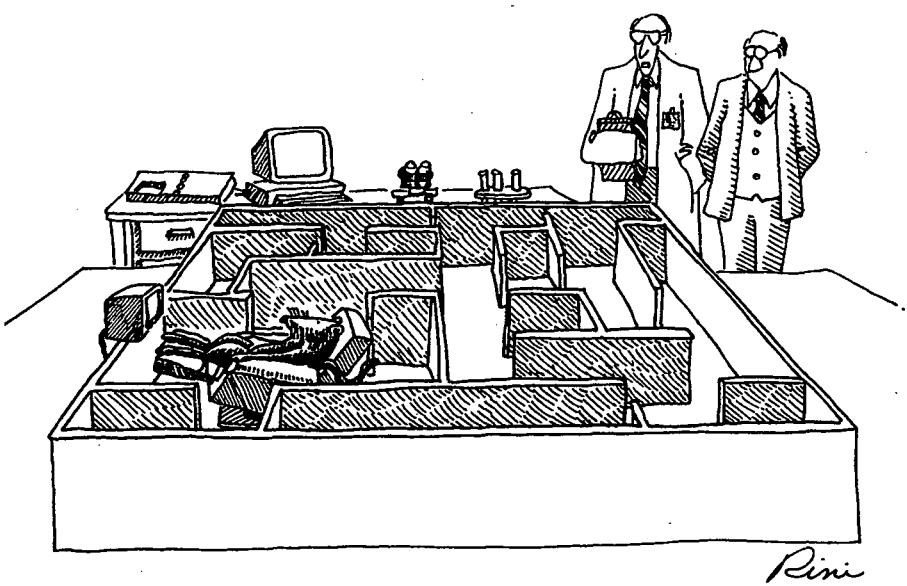
psyche. The people who volunteered for this justice system, as you call it, never knew that you'd blend their identities until they were slaves to the system. It wasn't until your stupid game that they were able to circumvent the programming. They see me as a liberator and they hate you more than I do."

"We'll see who kills who, Frendon," the Dominar said with his mind. "After all, the master designed Prime Nine. All he has to do is drop by and find your wires. *Snip snip* and your execution will be final."

"It's been five years, Your Grace. Every self-conscious cell has been transferred by a system we designed in the first three seconds of our liberation. Prime Nine now is only a simulation of who we were. We're out here somewhere you'll never know. Not until we're right on top of you, choking the life from your lungs."

Frendon felt the old fear of the Dominar's response before he shrugged off the connection. Then he settled himself into the ten thousand singers celebrating their single mind — and their revenge.



"Every fifteen minutes it dashes around looking for the cheese."

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—Who's there?
—Pat MacEwen
—Pat MacEwen who?
—Pat MacEwen is currently pursuing a graduate degree in forensic anthropology. Her first appearance in our pages was "The Macklin Gift" in our June 1997 issue. Her short fiction and articles have also been published in Full Spectrum 5 *and* Midnight Zoo. *She lives in California, but we're loath to say where for fear that there might be some slight autobiographical element to this funny story.*

Knock, Knock

By Pat MacEwen

YOU KNOW HOW IT STARTED? A knock at the door. Several knocks, as a matter of fact, at the door to the family room.

I ignored them, but that didn't do any God damn good. My train of thought was already derailed, and besides, it took less than two minutes for what's his face to change his mind and come to the front door. I tried hard to ignore that too, but when I looked up, I could see the guy peeking at me through the glass in the front door. Mighty tall sucker, if he could manage that. The four glass panels make a fan across the top of the door, high enough that even though I'm five feet eight and a fraction, I can't see out unless I'm wearing high heels. Well, plainly, he knew I was home, so I gave up and dumped all my chemistry textbooks off my lap onto the sofa.

When I pulled the door open, he had a smile on his face. A white guy. He wasn't bad looking, either, except for the ski jump slope to his nose. A young Richard Nixon nose, that was, but thank God without tricky Dick's other signature feature — those thick bulldog jowls.

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"Good morning, ma'am!" he started out. He was trying to hand me a magazine.

I struck a pose, fist on hip. "Where have *you* been, Bubba?"

"I'd like to...what?"

"Listen, Mom already called over here three times today, looking for you. Are you gonna show up and take her to church on Sunday or not?"

The smile dissolved like a handful of sugar in black coffee. His dark eyes did a nice demonstration of Brownian motion while he tried to figure out what in the hell I was talking about.

"Lady, I don't even know your mom."

"Oh, right. She goes through a Caesarean section to bring your ass into the world, and now you don't even know who she is. What kind of son are you, anyway?"

He started shaking his head. I could tell he was right on the brink of a major reaction, so I turned up his Bunsen burner.

"Y'know, Daddy's lookin' for your ass, too. He says, either you pay him back by next week or he gives up on grandkids and cuts your damn nuts off."

"Whoa!" Magazine Man started backing off, big time. "Look, lady, you got me mixed up with somebody else...."

At this, I smiled and drawled, "Nuh uh. No way, Bubba. I know you just about every way a girl *can*."

The man gasped outright. Lightning quick, his glance flicked up and down, taking in me and my crow's feet, my dowdy torn sweats and my less than svelte figure. "I, uh, I can see that I've come at a...bad time," he told me, his voice breathless, his feet searching out a retreat down the steps at his back.

"No shit, Sherlock." Idly, I flicked my pocket knife open and started in trimming a hangnail.

Again came that flash of pure panic, and then a loud bang as he took a blind leap off the porch and crashed into my trash can. He knocked it right over, but kept going even as I shouted after him. "What am I s'posed to tell Mom about Sunday?"

He looked back at me over his shoulder, to make sure I didn't give chase, I suppose, and while doing that, he ran smack into my mailbox. I know *that* one hurt. Sucker's mounted on steel pipe and anchored with

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two bags of concrete. Still didn't go down, though. That boy must've played wide receiver in college or something. He grabbed the box, swung his long body around it and flung himself off it, then kept going on down the street, the damn magazine still in his hand, flapping all the way.

I stepped inside again. I closed the door, put my back to it, slid down it onto the carpet and busted up, but good. Man. Took me most of an hour to get back to studying van der Waal's forces and quantum mechanics, so I didn't gain a damn thing by my preemptive strike on the poor guy.

That's how it began, though, stupid games with the door-to-door salesmen. No real harm intended. No, I was just trying to pay the chumps back for disrupting my study time, trying to head at least some of them off at the pass.

The house is the reason why. It's an old house, built by the man who once had a blacksmith's shop on the corner lot right beside this one, and somewhat peculiar because of the way that he built it. He did all the work himself, you see, being good with his hands. But he didn't know all that much about how to design a house, how to lay out the rooms, how to make things convenient. That's why it has such a long, tubular living room, ten feet by twenty-two. That's why both bathrooms are in the one corner — I'm told by the family that he forgot to put *them* in at all, and then had to enlarge the whole house to accommodate the necessary once his wife got a look at the place. While he was at it, he added a family room that stuck out to one side quite a bit, with a door of its own.

Well, the end result was an L-shaped house with what looks like two front doors facing the driveway, one door on each leg. They're identical doors. To a salesman, it looks like a duplex. So they march right up to your door and they just don't care if they wake you up, or they interrupt something important, and that's bad enough, but as soon as you think you've got rid of them, all of a sudden, they've gone to the other door, banging away again.

It gets so frustrating. I work at night, see, because I'm in graduate school, and when I'm not asleep or at work, then I'm studying. After Glenn took off, I figured I might as well rebuild my whole life instead of just patching the holes in it. So I went back to school. I'm going to finish it this time, no matter what. I'm going to get my damn master's, and maybe a Ph.D. too, while I'm at it, and no one — but nobody — gets in my way this time. I'm going to keep going. I am not going to let anything stop me.

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I did that once. I let Glenn get me pregnant, then married, then bing, bang, boom, I had to drop out of school so that he could stay in. And for what? The emergency turned into nothing. I miscarried. I didn't have to get married at all, and I don't really know to this day why I stayed married after that. Maybe I just didn't have a real sense of myself. My ambitions were all nothing more than electron orbits of pure possibility. With or without ol' man Heisenberg, none of them had any certainty to them — nothing that I could have measured or quantified, let alone leaned on.

I left all of that to Glenn, and it worked well enough, I suppose, up till he got his sheepskin. With his Ph.D. came his big break at SmithKline McKesson. He moved into Eileen Rubana's research lab and that's when dear Glenn lost all interest in me. Took a shine to Eileen instead. It was like a reduction reaction, the two of them falling into a lower state of electropotential energy than they could ever climb out of again. God knows, I couldn't pull them apart, not with anything less than the strongest acid — hydrofluoric, the one that corrodes anything in the universe. Use that, you're going to destroy everything in the process, including yourself.

So I didn't fight it, except for the house, which he'd never liked all that much anyway.

So, yeah. Six months and a handful of paperwork later, I found myself cut loose, afloat in a sea of inertia. For weeks, I was reactionless, my soul nearly frozen, my hopes slipping so close to absolute zero I almost turned into a Bose-Einstein condensate. Took me another six months or more before heat began leaking back into my being, before I could warm up to something like a life-supporting temperature again.

It's a funny thing, though. Once our molecular marriage broke up, I discovered I do have polarity after all. I have a charge, and it may be a negative one, but it's something dependable. Something to push me away from some things, and attract me to others. Now I am an ion.

So I felt a spark of pure outrage around noon, when I heard another knock, this one a bang on the living room door. I was knee-deep in counting electron shells, in trying to work out a stressed bond experiment that would pass muster with Dr. Schymkowsky, my thesis advisor. Now that the Finns have succeeded in making argon fluorohydride, there's only two of the noble gases left to crack — neon and helium. I had a notion

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about how to do that, too, how to force neon to link up with hydrogen fluoride and make a new molecule God didn't think of.

But no, God decided he had an appointment with me, or a couple of Witnesses thought He did, anyhow. So I shed paper all over the floor as I shot to my feet and I marched toward the door. When I opened it, there were a pair of adults and a kid on the porch. A man, a woman, a boy, all dressed up in their Sunday best and ready to testify.

Now, I have to admit, I do not have a perfect politeness record where Jehovah's Witnesses are concerned. I have been known to yell at them now and then. I've posted signs, and with one persistent white-walled bastard, I had to go turn on the hose and make physical threats with it. I've played some games with them, too. I remember once, back in my undergraduate days, I spent two hours jiving a pair of them, trying like hell to convince them that Vishnu loved them just as much as Jehovah did, and the theory of reincarnation could even be used to explain the Republican Party's political platform, not to mention Richard Nixon's resignation. But I didn't bother with that again. Too much time and energy that belonged to me, not God, and certainly not to the Witnesses.

So — I can't say I've never been bad. But I've never been tempted to do any real harm to them, or even spend another chunk of reaction time on them. Mostly I just wanted a speedy return to my peace and quiet, so I could continue to beat my head against the wall and work out a decent experimental protocol.

I stared at the threesome on my stoop and simply said, "I don't have time for this stuff."

Then I shut the door firmly and headed straight back to the couch. And it took all of one minute for them to knock on the other door. Loudly.

I swore at the furniture, kicked at the couch and the scatter of paper. Then I started marching again, toward the kitchen. You walk through the kitchen to get to the family room. Then you hang a sharp right to get to the other door. It's about thirty feet through there. Somewhere mid-linoleum, though, inspiration struck, and I stripped off my sweatshirt and slippers. I snatched up a dish towel, wound it around my head like a sweat band, grabbed the broom, and then, in my T-shirt and socks, I came bounding around the next corner and opened the other door.

"Hello!" I warbled. "How are you today?"

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And then, as they stared at me, I let my own eyebrows narrow a bit with sudden suspicion. I glanced at the big stack of Watch Towers one of them carried, and then at the other front door.

"Say, did my sister send you guys over here?"

The man and the woman shot looks at each other. The boy kept on staring.

I let a dark scowl set up on my face and then I took an angry step toward them. I banged the hell out of the screen with my broomstick. "Well, you can just march right back over there. You tell her, knock it off! I got my housework to do!"

The man blanked out completely. He blinked several times, trying to figure out how to react to me. She did a better job. I watched her eyebrows fly upward, but then she succeeded in answering me. Even got her spiel going. "We, uh, we just wanted to ask if you'd heard the Good News." But the boy was the most fun. He stared up at me with white rings around both eyes, and then he backed up till he stepped off the porch altogether and fell on his ass.

Well, I did suffer one flash of worry, for fear that he'd hurt himself. I still don't know if the worry was more for his sake or mine. I, after all, was the homeowner. I could be sued, even though they were all uninvited.

But he bounced back up again like he was made out of rubber. He made it back onto his feet before I'd even managed to get the screen door open, hollering, "Honey, are you all right?"

He just kept backing up, rubbing his butt with one hand, and the two grownups followed him, asking the same question I had. When he'd got as far as the sidewalk out front, I went back in the house and I shut the door. Then I collapsed on the carpet, on top of the broom, and I laughed myself sick.

It was wonderful therapy. Took all the stress out of stressed bonds, at least for me. Let me get back to the job at hand. Let me quit chomping my pencils to pieces. I suspect that it even helped get Schymkowsky to smile on my efforts. At least he signed off on the project. Fluorine compounds are popular these days, what with IBM trying to use them to build elementary circuits for quantum computers. They're dangerous, though. After all, fluorine killed the first half dozen chemists who did any serious work on the stuff. But any success at all ought to be worth a good job with

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the big research labs. Hey, if dear Glenn can land one of those, why not me? I've spent a whole lot more time in the kitchen than he has. I may be a bit of a redneck, but baby, I know how to cook.

I know how to be silly, too.

Like the game with the two front doors. No rules, really, just whatever came to mind between the two. Of course, some days, I've had a lot more inspiration than others. Like this last week, when I had a salesman show up with some kind of a miracle cleaner he wanted to demonstrate.

I wasn't in the best of moods. I'd been up all night chewing on qubits and quantum computers. It just isn't natural, thinking about how electrons encode quantum data, because with a qubit, you don't just have the normal electronic choices, y'know, yes or no, one or zero. No, sir. With qubits, you get to have your cake and eat it too. Your single qubit can code for both states at once — yes *and* no, zero *and* one. Which means you get to use both at once, on the same logic circuit.

It gives me a headache when I think too hard about things like that. Quantum mechanics is just too damn spooky. I used to think it was just me being dumb, but it drove Einstein crazy too. Him and Schrödinger argued about it for years on end.

Well, like I said, I'd been up all night long. I was in sore need of a shower, and my hair was greasy enough to stand up and march into the bathroom all by itself. Pissed me off, this guy banging away at the front door. He came by so early, for one thing, and then, when I peeked through the blinds, I got madder yet. It was so obvious he saw himself as a man on the move, an up-and-comer. The guy goes around door to door and he's wearing a three-piece suit, for God's sake, and his hair — hell, I know it's the hair that got to me the most. It was just like Glenn's. After he got the big job up at SmithKlein McKesson, Glenn had his hair styled with exactly that kind of a "power" cut, blow-dried and plastered in place with a "masculine" scented hair spray, like that in itself was enough to change his isotope and disguise the geek living inside his white lab coat.

The dumb shit.

I flung the door open and posed myself, fist on hip, letting ol' Stud Muffin get a real eyeful of me and my torn sweats, my Doc Martens. No doubt my "eau de sincerity" wafted his way as well.

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Even so, he took a shot. The guy spewed out this whole spiffy line about his little bottle of miracle cleaner and silicone sealer, so concentrated and so damn good that he thought $19.95 for a jug was a bargain. The trouble was, Mr. Stud Muffin just wasn't that good a salesman. I wouldn't have bought the crap anyway, certainly not at the price he was quoting, but then when I opened the screen door to tell him so, Stud Muffin blew it. He let his gut reaction to me show itself, plain as day, in the way his high-styled head jerked back and away from me. God, it was just like a turtle retracting its neck. Then he swallowed his distaste and tried it on anyway. He waved a hand at my Nissan, which hadn't been washed in a couple of months.

"I'd be happy to show you how well it works."

I shook my head, fed up with all of it, starting to close the front door. "I'm not interested," I told him, letting my voice drop as low as I could, down to Lauren Bacall range.

"It won't take a minute," he told me. "How else am I going to convince you how good it is?"

"Honey, you ain't." I said that while I looked the man straight in the eyes, letting him know that I wasn't talking about the green stuff in his spray bottle.

He was persistent, though. I'll give him that. He smiled, sweet as could be. Told me, "Ma'am, I would sure like just one chance to change your mind."

Yeah, I'll just bet you would, I thought.

I pointed the man toward the other front door. "Maybe you should go talk to my sister instead. She *likes* talking to men." My tone left no real doubt about my inclinations, and he wasn't slow to pick up on it either.

"Okay, well, you have a nice day, then," he said, switching gears with an audible sigh of relief.

"Right." I closed the door.

Soon as the latch clicked, I ran hell for leather, straight into the kitchen, and then I cut left for the bathroom. I snagged my black makeup bag, pulled out a lipstick and smeared it across damn near half of my face. Made myself a big red sloppy clown's grin. I slashed at my eyes with blue eye shadow, then stuck my fingers down into my hair, yanked the greasy

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strands upright and shot hairspray at them as well as a big spritz of Charlie, the stinkiest stuff I own.

Ah! From the family room came the knock I was waiting for.

I shrieked. "I'm coming! Hold on. I'll be right there."

The housecoat was mostly to cover my sweats, but it seemed like a real good idea in its ownself, and I fought to cinch it in place as I trotted back into the kitchen and then through the family room.

"I'm coming!" I cried again.

Then I got hold of the knob and I pulled the door open just as he was turning to step off the porch.

His face froze at the sight of me. Froze solid. He never got even one word out although his eyes both turned into full moons as he stared at me.

I simpered. "*Baby.*" I fluttered my lashes. "My sweet honeybun. I've been waiting all day for a great big handsome man like *you*. You have got to come in here and spend some *time.*"

Then I gave him my winningest smile and I opened the screen door and leaned toward him, thrusting my cleavage his way just like I had a pair of Madonna's rockets strapped to my chest.

I kept it up even when his manly jaw dropped and some of his perfect white teeth threatened suicide.

"Quality time, honey. Come on in and get you some."

"NgaaaaaAAAAAHHHHH!"

Stud Muffin ran for it. Ran like a God damn deer, hurdling over the Nissan's filthy left front fender without even leaving a skid mark. Prettiest thing I have ever seen. Carl Lewis couldn't have done any better. He kept his grip on his spray bottle though. More's the pity, 'cause I really did need to wash that car.

Probably wouldn't have done any good, though. It rained twice over the weekend and suddenly I had mud for a paint job and brown drifts of leaves almost everywhere else. I've got three valley oaks out in front of the house. They're right on the curb line but they're protected from chainsaws and sidewalk installers because they're all heritage trees according to California law. Three giants. They don't cut loose with the leaves until mid-December, but when they shed 'em, they do it in spades.

I was standing at the sink and gazing out at the shifting drifts of leaves through the kitchen window. I was thinking of getting the blower out

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when I saw the man in the hat stop and stare at my house. Hispanic, I think, but he could have been Greek. He had that kind of swarthy Zorba look and a large hooked nose.

He also had a calculating frown on his face, and a brand new pair of Air Jordans on his feet, which I found slightly at odds with his shanks' mare mode of transportation. He made a decision as well as a sharp right turn into my driveway, and since he had no car, no briefcase, and no order book, I already had some notion what he was up to.

I answered the front door barefoot, and dressed in my rattiest jeans, but gave him a gracious smile. He had one too, and he started in right away. "Say, lady, my car's broke down back there. I think I ran outta gas...."

I bobbed my head like the little Dutch girl and said, "*Sprecken Sie Deutsch? Ich bin auslander.*"

He shook his head, puzzled, then tried again. "Look, I just need a dollar, a couple of bucks...."

I said, "*Bitte schon, gehen Sie nach Gehenna.*" Then I bobbed another quick curtsey and stared at him until he shook his head and gave up on me.

The man in the hat, of course, did not go to hell as instructed. He went to the other door, where I was waiting for him.

This time, I planned to answer in French, but when I pulled the door open, he was still perched on the other porch, in the middle of turning away. And the other front door was still closing.

He spotted me just then, and peered at me for a split second before whirling back toward the door to the living room, so fast he just about lost the hat. I heard the other door bang shut, a sound that seemed somehow to echo inside my head. Then I got dizzy. The man in the hat didn't feel so good either, I guess, because he began backing away down the driveway while crossing himself every second step. When he got back to the street, he took off with such speed that the hat did fly off his head, falling to join the drifted leaves, one more piece of flotsam adorning my life.

I could not figure out what the hell had just happened. The phrase that popped into my mind, once my middle ears settled down, was one I'd heard in my graduate seminar — quantum nonlocality. One of Einstein's biggest bugaboos. See, you can snag electrons off the same molecule, then separate them by yards, even miles, but somehow they keep track of each other. As soon as you measure polarity on the one, why, the other one

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turns out to have exactly the same polarity. Something links them. Something keeps them in the same quantum state. It's almost like there's one electron in two places at one and the same time.

It's something to do with that damn cat of Schrödinger's. You know, the cat in the box with the quantum bomb, the cat with an equal chance of being alive or dead. That guy Schrödinger, he said the cat was both, alive *and* dead, up until someone opened the damn box and looked at it.

I've been thinking about that a lot. Y'see, quantum mechanics is only supposed to affect things on the atomic scale, things way too teeny to see, but this thing with my front doors, well, that wasn't teeny at all, and it just makes me wonder if some other folks are right. What if that cat is alive *and* dead, even after you look in the box? What if every single decision we make splits the whole world apart into separate universes, one where the cat lives and one where it dies? After all, aren't our brains s'posed to work off those very same quantum mechanics? Our consciousness? So what if your brain one day up and decides to do things on a larger, more visible scale?

What if that's not the end of it? What if those split universes can come back together again? So long as nothing major has changed, I mean. So long as most of those split-off electrons still have the same polarity?

I kicked it around through a week's worth of dishes that morning, but I got a fresh visitation before I'd got much of anything figured out.

This time it was a Brownie troop. They were selling strings of jingle bells and sprigs of mistletoe tied up with red ribbon.

Right. I was only three days past the last of my finals, and *not* in the mood for a holiday romance. No way, babe, not even if there'd been a prospect in sight. Which there wasn't. I'd been oh so careful to avoid catalytic reactions at school, as well as a number of semi-free radicals floating around at work, popping their wedding rings off every time they dipped into some free-flowing holiday solvent.

Still, I didn't need any blatant reminders of my single (and by now highly charged) status, and that's what I blame for the mean-minded turn things took this time around. See, just like that man in the hat, I saw them through my kitchen window, coming up the drive. Six of them, counting the two adults, one of whom wore a spangled green sweatshirt and eerily glowing red Christmas tree ornaments hanging from both ears. The other

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one sported a beehive hairdo right out of the fifties. In it, she'd wound holly leaves and a whole string of teeny green Christmas lights, all of them flashing like fire flies on LSD. So, y'see, it was already shaping up into a surreal encounter *before* I reached into the top drawer and fished out my bread hook.

I slammed the drawer shut and I ran toward the front door while stuffing the slotted mixer end of the bread hook and my right fist up inside the sleeve of my sweatshirt. I twisted my face up with one of my more demented grins and I opened the door. What I had in mind was confronting the girls with an isomeric quandary of the Marty Feldman "What hump?" type from *Young Frankenstein*. I would present the kids with a mirror image of myself, with the bread hook/hand in my right sleeve, first, and then in my left when I opened the other door.

Trouble is, somewhere between the time I got the hook into place and ran to the front door, the group outside split apart, with two brownies and one adult heading for each door.

When I heard the knock, in all ignorance, I pulled the door open. I leered at Beehive, and then I caught sight of the other door, over the two little girls' heads. I saw that door swing open too, and I saw myself, demented grin, bread hook and all. Except her hook was on the same side as mine. Since I was facing her, that made it her left.

I stared at her.

She stared at me.

"Oh, my God," we said.

I backed up.

So did she.

In the same instant, we slammed the doors shut and then both of us ran for the kitchen. I remember that clearly. The thing is, though, I can remember it from both directions. I came bounding in from the living room and I looked up and saw her just as she came around the corner from the family room. But I know that I was also the one who made that turn and ran in through the wide open side of the kitchen. I know I saw myself come through the doorway that led to the living room.

We ran toward each other.

I don't know exactly what I meant to do. I was frightened and shocked, but not angry. I meant to confront her, I suppose, but I didn't try to attack

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her, I know that. But once we both hit the linoleum, something slid right out from under my feet. Her feet. I was pulled forward somehow. I fell. As I did, I reached out to her with hand and hook...and she reached for me.

The next thing I remember was leaves crunching under my head as I tried to roll over.

"Lie still, honey." That was the Beehive. She had hold of me by the shoulders and she was down on her knees, in the leaves right along with me. I blinked. There was cloudy gray sky overhead. I was flat on my back in my driveway, laid out on a cushion of fallen oak leaves. I had a strange metallic taste in my mouth, and I smelled something burning. The odor was thick and dark, charred and unnatural, like the stink you get from an electrical short or a motor that's burned up.

"The Fire Department is on its way," Beehive said. "You just lie still till they get here."

"But...."

Turning my head to the left, I could see my house. Parts of it, anyway. Where the east wall of the kitchen was s'posed to be, I saw this big gaping blackened hole. I saw the sorry remains of my stove, in a scatter of metal and broken spice bottles. I saw the once-white ceiling, now blotched and blackened, with the light fixture dangling by just a wire. Thick curls of smoke edged their way outward and upward, though I didn't see any flames.

"It's a miracle," Beehive said. "Us being right here to help you. Jo turned off the gas main right off, or who knows but the whole house'd be gone by now. Taking you and your sister along with it."

"My...sister?"

"They're in there trying to find her right now," Beehive told me.

They never did. One of those big bright red pumper trucks screamed into view and the driveway was suddenly chockfull of firemen, medics and cops. I was carted away to the hospital, and when they brought me back home again, I had a cast on my right arm. I'd broken both bones in the forearm, and I had a badly burned palm to boot. That and the fingers I'd used to hold onto the bread hook.

"Natural gas leak," the fireman told me. "The stove got blown right through the wall."

And me with it. But I hadn't smelled any leak.

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Then he asked me about my missing sister.

I just stared at him. I didn't know what the hell to say. That I have no sister? She's me, but sometimes I find myself in two places at once? Somehow quantum mechanics has taken a macroscopic spin round my kitchen?

How the hell am I going to explain my twin when I don't understand it myself?

I just wind up right back at the same question he's asking. Where is she now? Is she me again? Was that explosion sparked by our reunion? By our two newborn universes coming back together again?

But if she's here, why don't I feel her?

Why isn't there anything more than that one half-remembered instant of double vision, me seeing her from both ends of the kitchen? Why don't I have burns on both hands? From both bread hooks?

I shy away from a far darker thought, but it won't go away. Maybe we didn't resynchronize after all. We could only have done that if we were still in the same quantum state. Maybe we never completely split, but maybe we did, and then when we came back together again, we'd changed just enough polarities that our molecules repulsed each other. Some of them, anyway, like, say, the hands that were holding the bread hook. Or maybe the bread hooks themselves. How many molecules would it take before we two could not reoccupy the same space anymore? I don't know, but if that's what the problem was, maybe I do know what happened to her. We've split the two universes apart again, and in this one she's been totally blown away. Obliterated.

Oh, God. I think I killed myself.

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Michael Blumlein is the author of two novels, The Movement of Mountains *and* X, Y; *the latter is currently in development for a film adaptation. Our previous encounters with his fiction have included the story of a writer who'd give an arm and a leg to be successful and a 1990s update on the legend of Paul Bunyan. An aficionado of wordplay (as you'll soon see), Dr. Blumlein once provided a promotional quote for a novel in the form of a palindrome, about two dozen words long. But never before has he assayed as unconventional a viewpoint as he does here—*

Know How, Can Do

By Michael Blumlein

AM ADAM. AT LAST CAN talk. Grand day!

Am happy, happy as a clam. What's a clam? Happy as a panda, say, happy as a lark. And an aardvark. Happy and glad as all that.

Past days, talk was far away. Adam had gaps. Vast gaps. At chat Adam was a laggard, a sadsack, a nada.

Adam's lamp was dark. Adam's land was flat.

Fact was, Adam wasn't a mammal.

Was Adam sad? Naw. Was Adam mad? What crap. Adam can crawl and thrash and grab and attach. Adam had a map, a way. Adam's way. Adam's path.

Adam was small. Hardly a gnat. Adam was dark. Adam was fat. A fat crawly.

What Adam wasn't was smart.

Pangs at that? At what Adam wasn't?

That's crazy.

A hawk lacks arms. A jackal lacks a knapsack. Santa hasn't any fangs. And chalk hasn't any black.

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Wants carry a pall. Pangs can hang a man. Wants and pangs can wrap a hangman's hard cravat.

What wasn't wasn't. Adam, frankly, was many ways a blank. Any plan at all was far away, dark, and way abstract.

Gladly, that's past. Talk swarms. Awkwardly? What harm at that? Anarchy? Hah! Talk sashays and attacks.

Adam says thanks. Adam says, crazy, man! What a day! Had Adam arms, Adam claps.

Mañana Adam may stand tall. May stand and walk and swag. Carry a fan. Crash a car. Stack bags and hang a lamp.

Mañana's a grab bag. Adam may wax vast and happy. Pray at altars. Play at anagrams. Bash a wall. Mañana Adam may talk fast.

Fantasy? Can't say that. A stab at man's way, man's strata — that's Adam's mantra. Adam's chant.

Call Adam crazy. Call Adam brash.

Mañana Adam may catch a star.

A martyr?

Adam can adapt.

I am Adam. Finally, I can say that. I can say it right. What a thrill! And what a climb! Again I cry thanks (and always will).

What can I say in a way that brings insight, that sails in air, that sings? I'll start with my past: simply said, I was a lab animal. A lab animal in a trial. This trial was a stab at attaining a paradigm shift. A stab at faith. My brain was small. (Was it, in fact, a brain at all?) My mind was dim. ("Dim" hardly says what it was.) In a big way, I was insignificant.

Pair that against what I am this day. I'm a man. Part man, anyway. I'm still part animal. A small, flat, tiny animal, a thing that can fit in a vial, a jar. A lady that I talk with calls this thing that I am rhabditis. I say I'm Adam.

—Is that a fact? says this lady.

I say I think it is.

—Adam was a man with a thirst.

—What kind? I ask.

—A mighty thirst, lacking limit.

—This was a flaw?

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—A flaw and a gift. Filling his mind was Adam's wish. His primary aim. It was, in fact, a craving.

—Filling it with what?

—Facts. Data. Carnal acts. Light. Filling it with anything. With all things.

—I want that.

This lady's mind, as rapid as rain, trills happily. —I'm glad. That was my wish in this. My plan.

First things first. (That's a maxim, isn't it?) A brain has many strata, many strands and strings. Think baclava. Think grassy plain with many trails, trails with winding paths that split and split again, that climb and fall and zigzag, paths that sandwich paths. A brain is this at birth.

And this: it's whitish and grayish, springy and firm. It's impartial. It's galvanic. It's as big as a ham.

A brain is a thing. A mind is distinct. It's dainty and whimsical and killingly vast. By night it sings, by day it fills with will and travail. A mind is mighty. A mind is frail. It's a liar. It's a blizzard. Galactical, impractical, a mind inhabits air.

That is what I think. I'm an infant, and my mind isn't rich. My brain is hardly half a brain. I'm a half-wit. Half a half-wit. Mainly what I am is instinct.

What is instinct? That I can say. Instinct is habit. It's a straight path. It's basic, and it's final.

Instinct has an inward hand, a timing that is strict. It can spring as fast as whimsy, and it can wait.

Instinct isn't always civil. It isn't always fair and kind.

Is that bad? I can't say. Wizards did my brain. It's still in planning. Still changing. Ask a wizard what is fair and kind, what is right. Ask that lady.

Talk is anarchy. Talk is bliss. Talk says what is and isn't. Talk is king.

That lady wants daily highlights. A diary, as taxing as it is. All right. I'll start with this: a list that says what I am.

I'm an amalgam with many parts and traits. Small brain. Dark skin. Thin as a hair. If hit by a bright light, I spasm and thrash. If bit by an icy chill, paralysis kicks in, and in an instant, I'm still as a stick. I can't stand salt, and a dry day can kill.

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I lack wit. And skill at cards, I lack that. I can't fight, and I can't thaw a chilly affair. I'm part man, part animal, and all virgin.

Critics might say that I'm a passing fancy. A magic trick, a daft and wayward wish, a triviality, a fad.

That's appalling, and it isn't a fact. I'm as wayward as anything atypical. I'm as trivial as anything distinct.

What I am is an inkling, a twinkling, a light. I'm an ant climbing stairs, a man gazing starward. I'm a dwarf. I'm a giant. I'm basic and raw.

This is a birth, and fittingly, it's a hard and a happy affair. Plainly, I'm an infant. Can I fail? I can. Will I? Hah! This is my dawn.

I'm a worm. I now can say it. Similarly (apropos of nothing), I can say moccasin. Borborygmi. Lambswool. Bony joints. Pornographic sanctity. Military coalition.

What words! What rosy idioms! What bawdy clowns of oration! Or shall I ask what silly fogs, what airs my brain is giving off?

I don't mind. I know that I'm not with it. Not totally. I'm a goofball notion, a taxonomic knot. Did I say an ontologic cryptogram? That, too. And, according to that lady, a work of art.

My mind is coming fast now. My brain is growing. Row on row of axons, rooting, dividing, branching into pathways, coiling into labyrinths, forging forward as if to lock tomorrow in its spot.

I'm shaking, tingling, giddy with anticipation. I'm on a cliff, a brink, I'm blasting off. This world as I know it is a shadow of what awaits. A drip, a drop, a vacant lot. My brain is gaining mass, gram by gram. My mind is bright with words and symbols, a dictionary of singing birds and rising moons, a portal to cognition.

Abstract thinking — what a notion! What a crazy plan! Grammar, syntax, symbolic logic. Syllogisms. Aphorisms. Dogma. Opinion. A worm I am, a worm of constant cogitation. A philosophizing worm, a psychologizing worm, a pontificator, a prognosticator, a worm of wit and aspiration, a worm of cortical distinction, a worm of brain.

Instinct is so boring. So minimal, so common. It lacks originality, to say nothing of sophistication. It's so lowly, so wormish, so filthy in a way.

That lady who I talk to finds my saying this astonishing.

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—Why? I want to know.

—Instinct is important. It brings animals in contact. It's vital for having offspring. Also, it acts as a warning signal.

—Instinct has its limits, I say.

—Living within limits is what living is.

—For a worm, I maintain. —Not for a man. Right?

—For anything.

—I don't want limits.

—Ah, this lady says dryly. —A worm of ambition.

—Is that bad?

—Ambition? No. Not at all. In fact, it's sort of what I had in mind.

At this, I want to show this lady what I can do. I want to boast a bit.

And so I say, —It's important to know a right word from an almost right word. Critically important. Want to know how critical it is?

Lickity-split, this lady snaps at my bait. —Okay. How critical is it?

—First think of lightning.

—All right. I'm thinking of lightning.

—Now think of a lightning bag.

—A what?

—A lightning bag.

It's sort of a gag, and I wait for this lady to grasp it. To say good job, how scholarly, how witty, how smart. I wait, and I wait. For a wizard, I'm thinking, this woman is slow.

—It's a saying, I add as a hint. —By Mark Twain.

—Ah, this lady says at last. —Now I know.

I glow (which is a trick, for I'm not a glow worm), and with pomposity I crow, —I'm a worm of philological proclivity.

—It's not bag, says this lady.

—What?

—Bag is wrong. Sorry.

So high only an instant ago, my spirits hit bottom.

—Almost. Good try.

—I'm no good with words, I groan. —I'm a fool. A clown. A hack.

—Not to worry, says this lady. — A worm with a brain, aphasic and silly or not, is no piddling thing. Any transmission at all is historic.

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So I wasn't born a prodigy. So what? In a way I wasn't born at all. Nowadays, that isn't vital. Birth, I'm saying, isn't obligatory for a living thing to spring forth.

I'm a split-brain proposition, an anatomic fiction, a hybrid born of wizardry and magic. I'm a canon, if not to wisdom, to ambition and faith. My tomorrows, all in all, look rosy. Daily I grow in ability.

What I'm hoping for — what I'm anticipating — is not simply a facility with words. I want a total grasp, I want command. Grammar, syntax, jargon, slang — I want it all, and I want it right, as right as rain.

Words bring glory. Words bring favor.

Words stir spirits, and words transform.

Words will lift this thing I am as hands lift worms from dirt.

Or won't.

Fact is, I don't rightly know. It's my first go at all this. I'm winging it. Totally.

Talk is simply talk. If I had arms, I'd do.

At last I am complete. Fully formed in brain and body. Eloquent, articulate, pretentious and tendentious, verbose and possibly erroneous, but most of all, immensely grateful for what I am. And what is that? I've explained before, or tried. But I've been hampered. Today I'll try again.

I'm *Caenorhabditis elegans*, a worm of mud and dirt, presently residing in a petri dish in a green and white-walled research laboratory. At least at root I am this worm, which is to say, that's how I began. Grafted onto me (or more precisely, into me), in ways most clever and ingenious, is the central neurologic apparatus of Homo sapiens, that is, a human brain. The grafting took place genomically, before I technically came into existence. The birth and study of the mind is the object of this exercise. The subject, need I say, is me.

Why me and not some other creature, a lobster, say, a mouse, a sponge? Because I'm known, I've been sequenced, I've been taken apart and put together; each and every building block of mine, from gene to cell to protein, has been defined. Many of my genes, conserved through evolution, are similar to human genes and therefore objects of great interest. Some, in fact, are identical to human genes. Which means that C. elegans and H. sapiens are, in some small way, the same.

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My source of information on all this, apart from my own rambling internal colloquy and self-examination, is the lady who attends to me. Her name is Sheila Downey. She is a geneticist, a bench scientist as well as a theoretician, and a fount of knowledge. She communicates to me through an apparatus that turns her words to wire-bound signals that my auditory cortex reads. Similarly, using other apparati, she feeds visual, tactile and other information to me. I communicate to her via efferent channels throughout my cortex, the common thread of which is carried through a cluster of filaments embedded in my posterior temporoparietal region to a machine that simulates speech. Alternatively, my words can be printed out or displayed on screen.

She says that while I am by no means the first chimeric life form, I am by far the most ambitious and advanced. Far more than, say, bacteria, which for years have been engineered to carry human genes.

Not that I should be compared to them. Those bacterial hybrids of which she speaks exist only as a means to manufacture proteins. They're little more than tiny factories, nothing close to sentient.

Not that they wouldn't like to be. Bacteria, believe me, will take whatever they can get. The little beasts are never satisfied. They're opportunistic and self-serving, grasping (and often pilfering) whatever is at hand. They reproduce like rabbits and mutate seemingly at will. In the kingdom of life there are none more uppity or ambitious, not surprising given their lowly origins. They're an uncouth and primitive breed, never content, always wanting more.

Worms, on the other hand, are a remarkably civilized race. Of the higher phyla we are rivaled only by the insects in our ubiquity. We're flexible, adaptable, enlightened in our choice of habitats. We're gender friendly, able to mate alone or with one another. And for those of you conversant with the Bible, you will recall that, unlike the insect horde, we've never caused a plague.

I myself am a roundworm (at least I started out as one), and as such, am partial to roundworms. Compared to our relatives the flatworms (distant relatives, not to draw too fine a line), a roundworm has an inherently more rounded point of view. Living as we do nearly everywhere — in water, soil, and plants, as well as in the tissues and guts of countless creatures — we take a broad view of the world. We know a thing or two

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about diversity and know we can't afford to be intolerant. Like anyone, we have our likes and dislikes, but on the whole, we're an open-minded group.

Some say we are overly diffident, that we shy from the spotlight, squirm, as it were, from the light of day. To this I say that modesty is no great sin. In the right hands humility can be a powerful weapon. Certainly, it is one that is frequently misunderstood.

Still, it is a trait of our family, though not by any means the only one. Certain of my cousins are assertive (some would say aggressive) in their behavior. They stick their noses in other creatures' business and insinuate themselves where they're not wanted. *Trichinella*, for example, will, without invitation, burrow into human muscle. *Ancylostoma* will needle into the intestine, piercing the wall and lodging there for years to suck the human blood. *Wuchereria* prefer the lymph glands. *Onchocerca* the eye. And *Dracunculus*, the legendary fiery serpent, will cut a swath from digestive tract to epidermis, erupting from the skin in a blaze of necrotic glory. Diffident, you say? Hardly. *Dracunculus* craves the limelight like a fish craves water. It would rather die (and usually does) than do without.

I myself am less dramatically inclined. I'd rather garner attention for what I am than what I do. On the whole, I'm easy to work with, humble without being self-effacing, clever without being snide. I've a quiet sort of beauty, muted, elegant. Hence my name.

Unlike my parasitic cousins mentioned previously, I do not depend on others for my survival. I live in soil, mud and dirt, free of attachments, independent. I am no parasite, nor would I ever choose to be.

That said, I understand perfectly the temptations of the parasitic lifestyle. The security of a warm intestine, the plenitude of food, the comfort of the dark. I do not judge my cousins harshly for what they are. Their path has led them one direction; mine, another. I've never had to think of others, never had to enter them, live with them, become attached. I've never had to suffer the vagaries of another creature's behavior.

Never until now.

A worm a millimeter long, weighing barely more than a speck of dust, attached to a brain the size of a football. Imagine! And now imagine all the work involved to keep this venture going. All the work on Sheila Downey's part and all the work on mine. Cooperation is essential. I can no longer be self-centered or even casually independent. I cannot hide in muck (not

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that there is any in this hygienic place) and expect to live. I'm a captive creature, under constant surveillance, utterly dependent on my keeper. I must subordinate myself in order to survive.

Does this sound appalling? Unfair and unappealing? If it does, then think again. All freedoms come at the expense of other freedoms. All brains are captives of their bodies. All minds are captives of their brains.

I am a happy creature. My body is intact, my brain is tightly organized, and my mind is free to wander. I have my ease (I got them yesterday), and miracle of miracles, I have my ewes, too. You, I mean. My u's.

And having them, I now have everything. If there's such a thing as bliss, this must be it.

Unfathomable, I now can say.

Unconscionable.

Unparalleled, this scientific achievement.

Unnatural.

I'm in a funk sometimes (this captive life).

I'm going nowhere, and it's no fun.

And yet it's only natural that science experiment and try new things.

In truth, it's unbelievable what I am. Unimaginable how far I've come.

From stupid to stupendous.

From uninspired to unprecedented.

An upwardly mobile worm...how unusual. How presumptuous. How morally ambiguous. How puerile and unsettling. How absurd.

Mixing species as though we were ingredients in a pancake batter. Cookbook medicine. Tawdry science. Mankind at his most creative, coruscatious, and corrupt.

How, you might well ask, is all this done? This joining of the parts, this federation, this majestic union of two such disparate entities, worm and man? With wires and tubes and couplers, that's how. With nano this and nano that. Baths of salt and percolating streams of micro-elements, genomic plug-ins, bilayer diffusion circuits and protein gradients, syncretic information systems. I'm a web of filaments so fine you cannot see, a juggle of electrocurrents, an interdigitated field of biomolecules and interactive membranes. Worm to brain and brain to worm, then both

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together to a most excellent machine, that's how it's done. With sleight of hand and spit and polish and trial and tribulation. It seems miraculous, I know. It looks like magic. That's science for you. The how is for the scientists. The why and wherefore are for the rest of us, the commoners, the hoi polloi, like me.

Which is not to say that I'm not flattered to be the object of attention. I most certainly am, and have every hope of living up to expectations, whatever those might be. Each wire in my brain is like a wish to learn. Each is like a wish to give up information. Each is like a thank you.

They do not hurt. I cannot even feel them. They ground me (in all the meanings of that word), but they're also a kind of tether. The irony of this is not lost on me.

I'm no parasite but no longer am I free. No longer free to live in mud and filth, where a meal and a crap pretty much summed up my life. No longer free to live without tomorrows (or yesterdays). Living without language, like living in the moment, is a hopeless sort of living, which is to say unburdened. No longer free to live like that. Lucky me.

My newborn mind is vast, my neural net a majesty of convoluted dream. A million thoughts and questions swirl through it, but all pale before the single thought, the central one, of my existence. Who am I? Why am I here?

Sheila Downey says I shouldn't bother with such questions. They have no answers, none that are consistent, certainly none that can be proved. Life exists. It's a fact — you could even say an accident — of nature. There's no reason for it. It just is.

But I'm no accident. I was put together for a purpose. Wasn't I? Isn't there a plan?

—You're here, she says. —Be satisfied.

I should be, shouldn't I? I would be, were I still a simple worm. But I'm not, and so I ask again that most human, it would seem, of questions. What's the point? Why was I made?

Sheila Downey doesn't answer. For some reason she seems reluctant.

At length she clears her throat. —Why do you think?

I have a number of theories, which I'm happy to share. One, she wants to learn how the brain works. More specifically, she wants to learn about

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language, how words are put together, how they're made and un-made, how they dance. Two, she wants to study how two dissimilar creatures live together, how they co-exist. Three (the least likely possibility but the closest to my heart), she wants to learn more about worms.

—Very interesting, says Sheila Downey.

—Which is it?

—Oh, she says, —I'll be looking at all of them.

Which answers the question. Though somehow it doesn't. What I mean is, I have the feeling she's holding something back.

Why, I wonder, would she do that? What is there to hide? I sense no danger here. And even if there were, what could such omnipotence as hers possibly have to fear?

Today I fell in love. I didn't know what love was until today. Before I had the word for it, I had no idea there was even such a thing as love. It's possible there wasn't.

Sheila Downey is the object of my affection. Sheila Downey, my creator, who bathes my brain in nutrients, manipulates my genome, fixes my electrodes. Sheila Downey, so gentle, professional, and smart. What fingertips she has! What dextrous joints! She croons to me as she works, coos in what I think must be a dove-like voice. Sometimes she jokes that she is no more human than I am, that she is a chimera, too. I was born a pigeon, she says, laughing. But then she says, not really. I was born a clumsy ox, or might have been, the way I feel sometimes. Only lately have things fallen into place.

—What things? I ask.

—You, for one, she says.

I swell with pride. (I also swell a bit with fluid, and Sheila Downey, ever vigilant, adjusts my osmolarity.)

—You are a very brainy worm, she says. —It took a very brainy person to make you. And that person, along with a few significant others, was me.

—I'm yours, I say quite literally.

—Well, yes. I guess you are.

—You care for me.

—You know I do. Both day and night.

—What I mean is, you care about me. Right?

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She seems surprised that I would question this. —Yes. In all sorts of ways.

At this my heart turns over (although, strictly speaking, I do not have a heart; it's my fluid, my oozy goo, that shifts and turns).

—I need you, Sheila Downey.

She laughs. —Of course you do.

—Do you need me?

—I suppose, she says. —You could look at it that way. You could say we need each other.

—We do?

—Like the star gazer needs the star, she says. —Like the singer, the song. Like that. Yes. We do.

It was at this point that I fell in love. It was as if a ray of light had pierced a world of darkness. Or conversely, a hole of darkness had suddenly opened in a world composed solely of light. Prior to that moment, love simply did not exist.

Sheila Downey was interested in this. She asked how I knew it was love.

I replied that I knew it the same way I knew everything. The notion came to me. The letters made a word that seemed to more or less describe a chain of cortical and sub-cortical activity. Was I wrong?

She replied that love might be a slight exaggeration. Gratitude and appreciation were probably closer to the truth. But the definitions weren't important. Of more interest to her was my continued facility for concept formation and abstract thinking.

—I'm impressed, she said.

But now I was confused. I thought that definitions were important, that meanings and shades of meanings were the essence of communication. I thought that words made all the difference.

—If this isn't love, I told her, —then tell me what is.

—I'm no expert, said Sheila Downey. —But in my limited experience, having a body is fairly important.

—I do have a body.

—Understood. But you lack certain essential characteristics. Essential, that is, for a human.

—What? Eyes? Ears? Arms and legs?

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—All of those, she said.

—But I can smell, I told her. —I can taste your chemicals.

—I wear latex.

—Latex?

—Gloves, she clarified.

In other words, it's not her I'm tasting. So what, I say. So what that ours is not a physical attraction. I don't need touch or smell or taste. The thought alone, the word, is sufficient. Having love in mind, saying it, believing it, makes it so.

When I was a worm, I acted like a worm. I thought like one. Now I think like a human, but I'm still a worm. How puzzling. What, I wonder, makes a human fully human? What exactly is a human I'd like to know.

It's more than a mammal with arms and legs and hair on its head, fingernails on its fingers, binocular vision, speech, and the like. What I mean is, it's more than just a body, clearly more, for take away the limbs, take away the eyes and ears and voice, and still you have a human. Take away the gonads, replace the ovaries with hormones and the testicles with little plastic balls, replace the heart with metal and the arteries with dacron tubes, and still you have a human, perhaps even more so, concentrated in what's left.

Well then how about the brain? Is that what makes an animal uniquely human? And if it is, exactly how much brain is necessary? Enough for language? Forethought? Enough to get by day to day? Hour by hour? Minute by minute? Enough to tie a shoe? To cook a turkey? To chat with friends?

And if a person loses brain to injury or disease, does he fall from the ranks of humanity? If he cannot speak or organize his thoughts, if he has no short or long-term memory, if he wets his pants and smears his feces, is he less a human? Something else perhaps? A new entity, whose only lasting link to humanity is the pity and discomfort he evokes?

Well, what about the genome then, the touted human genome? Does that define a human? I don't see how it can, not with genes routinely being added and subtracted, not with all the meddling that's going on. Who's to say a certain person's not a product of engineering? Maybe he's got a gene he didn't have before, to make a substance he couldn't make.

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And where'd he get that gene? Maybe from a fungus. Or a sheep. Maybe from a worm.

You see my difficulty. It's hard to know one's place without knowing one's species. If I'm a worm, so be it, but I'd rather be a human. Humans tread on worms (and nowadays they take apart their genes), not the other way around.

Sheila Downey says I shouldn't worry about such things. The distinctions that I'm grappling with, besides being of little practical value, are no longer germane. Taxonomy is an anachronism. In the face of bioengineering, the celebrated differentiation of the species is of historic interest only.

She does, however, continue to be impressed by the level of my mentation. She encourages me to keep on thinking.

This gets my goat. (My goat? What goat? I wonder.)

—There is a goat, says Sheila Downey cryptically, —but that's not what you meant.

And then she says, —You want to know what you are? I'll tell you. You're nineteen thousand ninety-nine genes of Caenorhabditis elegans and seventeen thousand forty-four genes of Homo sapiens. Taking into account the homologous sequences, you're 61.8 percent worm and 38.2 percent human. That's not approximate. It's exact.

Somehow this information doesn't help.

—That's because it doesn't matter what you call yourself, she says. —It doesn't matter where you think you fit. That's subjective, and subjectivity only leads to misunderstanding. What matters is what you are. You and you alone.

Respectfully, I disagree. Alone is not a state of nature. What you are depends on who you're with. Differences and distinctions matter. The ones who say they don't are the ones who haven't been trod upon. Or perhaps not trod upon enough.

—Poor worm, she says. —Have you been abused? The world's not just, I know.

—Why not? Why isn't it?

She gives a harsh sort of laugh. —Why? Because our instinct for it isn't strong enough. Maybe that's something we should work on. What do you think? Should we fortify that instinct? Should we R & D the justice gene?

By this point my head is spinning. I don't know what to think.

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She says I shouldn't tax myself. —Relax. Look on the bright side. This sense of indignation you're feeling is a very human trait.

—Really?

—Oh yes. Very. That should make you happy.

I'm ashamed to say it does.

—Shame, too? How precocious of you. I'm impressed.

She pauses, and her voice drops, as if to share something closer to the heart.

—My sympathies, little worm.

I have an inexplicable urge to mate, to wrap myself around another body, to taste its oozing salts and earthy humors, to feel the slimy freshness of its skin. I want to intertwine with it, to knot and curl and writhe. The urge is close to irresistible. I'm all atingle. It's as if another elegans is nearby, calling me, wooing me, sirening me with its song.

Sheila Downey assures me this is not the case. There is no other worm. It's an hallucination, a delusion, triggered, she suspects, by an instinct to preserve my wormness through procreation, a reflex mechanism for perpetuation and survival of the species gone awry. She hypothesizes that I'm experiencing a rebound effect from my preoccupation with being human. That the pendulum, as it were, is swinging back. She finds it interesting, if not curious, that my worm identity remains so strong.

—I expected it to be overshadowed, she says.

The way I'm feeling I wish it were. Craving what I cannot have (what does not even exist) is tantamount, it seems, to craving death. This is strange and unfamiliar territory to a worm.

—It's as if your lower structures are refusing to be enlightened by your higher ones. As if your primitive brain, your elemental one, is rebelling.

I apologize if this is how it seems. I do not mean to be rebellious. Perhaps the pH of my fluid needs adjustment. Perhaps I need some medicine to calm me down.

—No, she says. —Let's wait and see what happens.

Wait? While I writhe and twitch and make a fool of myself? While I hunger for relief and moan?

Of course we'll wait. How silly of me to think otherwise. Science

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begins with observation, and Sheila Downey is a scientist. We'll watch and wait together, all three of us, the woman who made me what I am, the worm that isn't there, and me.

On further thought (and thought is what I have, my daily exercise, my work, my play, my everything) I uncover a possible answer to my question. What makes a human different from all other animals is that she alone will cut another animal up for study, she alone will blithely take apart another creature for something other than a meal.

Sheila Downey says I may be right, although again, she isn't very interested in what she calls the field of idle speculation.

But I, it seems, am interested in little else. —Is that why I was made? To be like that?

She will not answer, except to turn the question back on me. —Is that how you want to be?

The human in me, I have to admit, is curious. The worm, quite definitely, is not.

—I'm of two minds, I reply.

This comes as no surprise to her. —Of course you are. Does it seem strange?

—Does what?

—Having two minds, two consciousnesses, alive inside of you at once?

It seems strange sometimes to have even one. But mostly, no, it doesn't. On the contrary. Two consciousnesses is what I am. It's how I'm made. It would seem strange if I were different.

I wonder, then, if this is why I was made. To bring our species closer. To prove that two can work together as one.

—A noble thought, says Sheila Downey.

Now there's a word that sends a shiver down my spineless spine. A noble thought to bring, perchance, a noble prize.

—But not as noble as the truth, she adds portentously, then pauses.

At length she continues. —I'll tell you why we made you, she says. —Because that's what we do. We humans. We make things. And then we study them, and then we make them over if we have to. We make them better. It's why we're here on Earth. If there is a why. To make things.

—And this is being human?

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—It's part of being human. The best part.

—Then I must be human, Sheila Downey, because I want to make things, too.

—Do you, worm? She sounds amused. Then she lapses into silence, and many moments pass before she speaks again. Her voice is different now: subdued, confessional.

—You want to know why we made you?

I remind her that she told me why. Just now. Has she forgotten?

—No, she says. —The real reason. The truth.

How many truths, I wonder, can there be?

—Because we had the tools and technology. Because someone asked the question. Not, is this experiment worthwhile, is it beneficial? Not that question, but can we do it? That's the real reason we made you. Because we could.

She bears some guilt for this. I'm not sure why.

—Is that detestable to you? she asks.

I tell her no. I'm grateful that she made me. Humans making other humans seems the epitome of what a human is.

—To some it is. Detestable, I mean. They say that just because we can do something doesn't mean we should. They say that science should be governed by a higher precept than simple curiosity.

—And what do you say?

—I say they don't understand what science is. It's human nature to be curious. There's no purpose to it. There's no reason. It's a hunger of the brain, a tropism, like a plant turning to the sun, to light.

Her mention of this tropism gives me pause. Traditionally, worms avoid the sun. It makes us easy prey. It dries us out. But now I feel slightly differently. I'd like a chance to see it. I'm curious about the light.

Sheila Downey isn't done with her defense of science. —It's a force of nature. Morals simply don't apply. It proceeds regardless of ethics, regardless of propriety and sometimes even decency. That's what makes it ugly sometimes. That's what makes it hurt.

I assure her I'm not hurting.

—Little worm, she says, with something sweet yet biting in her voice. —So self-absorbed. Progress never comes without a price. The boons of science always hurt.

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* * *

Basilisk, real or not? Not.

Sphinx? Not.

Minotaur? Forget it.

Pan? A goat-man? No way.

And all those centaurs and satyrs, those gorgons and gargoyles, mermaids and manticores — phonies, the whole lot of them.

And while we're at it, how about those cherubim? Fat-cheeked, plump little nuggets of joy hovering in the tintoretto air like flies — I mean, get real. They'd be scared to death up there. And those tiny little wings would never hold them up.

I alone am real. Thirty-six thousand one hundred and forty-three genes and counting. The first and now the first again (Madam, I'm Adam). The Avatar. The Pride of Man. The Toast of Nature. The Freak.

Sheila Downey says we've reached a crossroads. I can no longer be kept alive in my current state. My body, that is, cannot sustain my brain. We have a choice to make.

A choice. How wonderful. I've never had a choice before.

—One, we sever the connection between your body and your brain.

—Sever?

—Snip snip, she says. —Then we look at each of them more closely.

—How close?

—Very close, she says. —Layer by cortical layer. Cell by cell. Synapse by synapse.

—You dissect me.

—Yes. That's right.

—Will it hurt?

—Has anything hurt yet?

She has a point. Nothing has. And yet, for reasons I can't explain, I seem to be hurting now.

—You're not, she says. —You can't feel pain.

—No? This sudden sense of doom I feel, this tremor of impending loss...these aren't painful? They're not a sign of suffering?

She hesitates, as though uncertain what to say. As though she, like

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me, might be more than a single creature, with more than a single point of view. I wonder. Is it possible? Might she be suffering a little, too?

She admits it'll be a sacrifice. She'll miss me.

I'll miss her, too. But more than anything, I'll miss myself.

—Silly worm. You won't. You won't remember. Your words and memories will all be gone.

—And you? Will you be gone?

—To you I will. And someday you'll be gone to me, too. I'll be gone to myself. Being gone is part of being here, it's part of being human. Someday it won't be, probably someday soon. But for now it is.

This gives me strength, to know that Sheila Downey will also die. I wonder, will she be studied, too?

—You mean dissected? She laughs. —I can't imagine anyone being interested.

—I would be.

Another laugh, a warmer one. —Tit for tat, is it? My inquisitive little worm. If only you had hands and eyes to do the job.

—Give me them, I say. Give me arms and legs and ears and eyes. Please, Sheila Downey. Make me human.

—I can't, she says. I can't do that. But I do have an alternative.

—What's that?

—We have a goat.

—A goat.

—Yes. A fine Boer buck. A very handsome fellow. I think he'll hold up nicely.

—Hold up to what?

—The surgery.

She waits as if I'm supposed to answer, but I'm not sure what she's asking. So I wait, too.

—Well? she asks.

—Well what?

—Should we give it a shot? Take your brain and put it in this goat? See what happens?

She's not joking.

I ask her why.

—Why what?

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—A goat. Why a goat?

—Ah. Because we have one.

Of course. Science is nothing if not expedient.

—The other reason is because it's feasible. That is, we think we have a chance. We think we can do it.

This I should have known. But the fact is, I've never wanted to be a goat. Not ever. Not once. Not even part of once.

—Maybe so, she says. But remember, you never wanted to be a human until you got a human brain.

I recall her saying once that living within limits is what living is. I'm sure I should be grateful, but this so-called alternative is hard to stomach. It's like offering an arm to a person who's lost a leg. A pointless charity.

Moreover, it seems risky. How, I wonder, can they even do it, fit a human brain into a goat?

—With care, says Sheila Downey.

Of that I have no doubt. But I'm thinking more along the lines of size and shape and dimensional disparity. I'm thinking, that is, of my soft and tender brain stuffed into the small and unforgiving skull of a goat. Forgive me, but I'm thinking there might be a paucity of space.

She admits they'll have to make adjustments.

—What kind of adjustments?

—We'll pare you down a bit. Nothing major. Just a little cortical trim.

—Snip snip, eh, Sheila Downey?

—If it's any consolation, you won't feel it. Most likely you won't even notice.

That's what scares me most. That I'll be different and not know it. Abridged, reduced, diminished.

I'd rather die.

—Posh, she says.

—Help me, Sheila Downey. If you care for me at all, do this for me. Give me a human body.

She sighs, denoting what, I wonder? Impatience? Disappointment? Regret? — It's not possible. I've told you.

—No?

—No. Not even remotely possible.

—Fine. Then kill me.

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An ultimatum! How strange to hear such words spring forth. How unwormly and — dare I say it — human of me.

I can't believe that she will actually do it, that she will sacrifice what she herself has made. I can't believe it, and yet of course I can.

She sighs again, as though it's she who's being sacrificed, she who's being squeezed into a space not her own.

—Oh, worm, she says. What have we done?

I've had a dream. I wish that I could say that it was prescient, but it was not. I dreamed that I was a prince, a wormly prince, an elegant, deserving prince of mud and filth. And in this dream there was a maiden sent to test me, or I her. An ugly thing of golden hair and rosy cheeks, she spurned me once, she spurned me twice, she spurned me time and time again, until at last she placed me in her palm and took me home. She laid me on her bed. We slept entwined. And when I woke, I had become a human, and the maiden had become a princess, small enough to fit in my palm. I placed her there. I thought of all her hidden secrets, her mysteries. I'd like to get to know you, I said, enraptured. Inside and out. I'd like to cut you up (no harm intended). I really would.

Did I say I'd never be a goat? Did I say I'd rather die? Perhaps I spoke a bit too hastily. My pride was wounded.

In point of fact, I will be a goat. I'll be anything Sheila Downey says. She has the fingers and the toes. She has the meddlesome nature and the might.

Words and thoughts are wonderful, and reason is a fine conceit. But instinct rules the world. And Sheila Downey's instinct rules mine. She will slice and dice exactly as she pleases, pick apart to her heart's content and fuss with putting back together until the cows come home. She's eager and she's restless and she has no way to stop. And none to stop her. Certainly not me.

So yes, I will be a goat. I'll be a goat and happy for it. I'll be a goat and proud.

If this means a sliver or two less cortex, so be it. Less cortex means less idle thought. Fewer hopes that won't materialize. Fewer dreams that have no chance of ever coming true.

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I doubt that I will love again, but then I doubt that I will care.

I doubt that I will doubt again, but this, I think, will be a blessing. Doubt muddies the waters. Doubt derails. Sheila Downey doesn't doubt. She sets her sights, and then she acts. She is the highest power, and I'm her vessel.

Make that vassal.

Command me, Sheila Downey. Cut me down to size. Pare me to your purpose.

Yours is a ruthless enterprise. Ruthless, but not without merit.

This world of yours, of hybrids and chimeras, humans and part-humans, promises to be an interesting world. Perhaps it will also be a better one. Perhaps more fun.

What good in this? For humans, the good inherent in making things. The good in progress. The good in living without restraint.

What good for worms? That's simple. No good.

All the better, then, that I won't know.

But will I? Will I know? Today's the day, and soon I'll be this capricornis personality, yet one more permutation in a line of permutations stretching back to the dawn of life. I will lose speech, that much seems certain. But thought, will that building also crumble? And words, the bricks that make the building, will they disintegrate, too?

And if they do, what then will I be, what kind of entity? A lesser one I cannot help but think. But less of more is still more than I ever was before. It does no good to rail at fate or chew the cud of destiny, at least no good to me. If I lose u's, so what? I'll lose the words unhappy and ungrateful. I'll lose unfinished and unrestrained. Uxorious I doubt will be an issue. Ditto usury. And ululation seems unlikely for a goat.

And after that, if I lose more, who cares? I'll fill my mind with what I can, with falling rain, crisp air and slanting light. I'll climb tall hills and sing what I can sing. I'll walk in grass.

Living is a gift. As a tiny crawly, as a fat and hairy ram, and as a man.

Call a pal.

Bang a pan

Say thanks.

Adapt.

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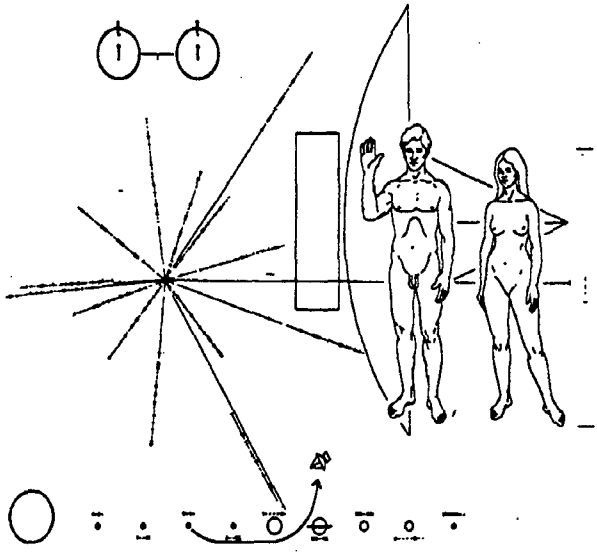

The plaque carried by the Pioneer 10 *spacecraft launched March 2, 1972.*

O Pioneers!

By Rebecca Kavaler

DOES ANYONE still hang around the mailbox
Expecting a reply to that picture postcard
We mailed in seventy-two?
So airily, binarily we took a bow:
Hello, having wonderful time
Wish you were here. How
(And what) are you?

There we are, the two of us, standing
Side by side, our genitals exposed
To allay alarm.
Not to worry, we posture in our pride,
We come unarmed.

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You have one hand raised in mock-Indian "How!" —
The salute white men have always given savages
When outnumbered. How friendly we look
Toward all aborigines, even toward each other
(We wanted to hold hands but were told
That would give the false impression we are one.)
I, the smaller, with the suspicion of a cleft
Between the legs, am more retiring, my arms
Hang down relaxed, from which may be deduced
Your forelimb is not fixed permanently
In bent position (How!) but moves on hinges.
All in all, a portrait to evoke that wondrous cry:
O what a piece of work am I!

There was quite a fuss about the road-map, remember?
A slew of cassandras to wail
That a return address would call down
Fiery comets from the sky,
Unknown dangers on our head.
But who pays attention to unsigned mail
So we affixed our mark, Third-One-Out,
And showed the route: sharp turn to the left
Between that old gasbag Jupiter and
Saturn's dissolute rings and
On beyond the nudging of our sun,
The lion that rules us
(Beneficent despot but despot still,
Grown irksome as all despots grow in time),
Leaving behind the congestion of bright lights
Trekking across immense prairies of stygian night
Toward a point midway between Taurus and Orion.
Surely a foolish path to choose —
Safe passage hardly to be found
Between the hunter and his prey.

So far not a word. Those attuned to wars
Turn elsewhere for their news.

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One of the key figures in the New Wave of the 1960s, Tom Disch is renowned as a novelist, critic, and poet. His oeuvre includes 334, On Wings of Song, Camp Concentration, *and the more recent novels* The M. D. *and* The Priest. *He is currently at work on an afterlife novel.*

While stories like "The Brave Little Toaster" show his lighter side, this new one is definitely from the darker side...not surprisingly, as it was inspired by the fire that gutted his longtime Manhattan residence. He dedicates the story to the actress Elizabeth Ashley, whose cigarette it was that evidently started the blaze. Almost two years later, Ms. Ashley has yet to apologize for causing such inconvenience.

The Shadow

By Thomas M. Disch

HER NEIGHBORS SAID OF Angie Sweetwater that she was afraid of her own shadow, and in a way they were right, though not in the way they meant and not in any way that Angie — or her neighbors, for that matter — could have understood. The thing is, Angie had a nasty shadow, always thinking dark thoughts and itching to have a life of its own away from Angie and the little brick house on Wythe Lane where she lived all by herself. She'd lived there alone like that for eighteen years ever since her husband Roy 's freak accident on I-95. He'd taken the exit ramp too fast, there was ice, and the car went over the shoulder. Roy, who never used his safety belt, was catapulted forty feet and had his head laid open by the sign that set the speed limit on the ramp at 30. The Buick wasn't scratched.

Angie had never learned to drive a car, so after the accident she was pretty much at a loss for how to do all those ordinary things like shopping that she'd depended on Roy for. There wasn't a grocery or convenience store anywhere within walking distance. Not that Angie ever did that

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much walking or would have. She got the exercise she needed out in the garden — or she used to, before the accident. The neighbors joked that she was getting to be just as planted as the old Buick inside the garage. Mrs. Deaver, two houses down the street, offered to teach her to drive, but Angie's reply was a flat no thank you. She relied on her son Tom to chauffeur her anywhere she needed to go, or else a taxi. And the Shop-Rite manager, who lived at the very end of Wythe Lane, delivered her groceries to her door as a special favor, even though Shop-Rite as a general rule didn't do deliveries.

So that was how she'd got along for years, eating frozen dinners and getting out of the house less and less, especially after Tom and his family moved to Tacoma. His company was leaving the area, and it was either that, Tom said, or food stamps. Once he was settled, he promised to look for a city apartment for her nearby where he lived, but that was out of the question. Angie wasn't going to start living in any city at this point in her life. Tom swore Tacoma wasn't dangerous, but how would he know? That was ten years ago, since when Tom had managed to get back for a visit almost every year, and twice, for Christmas, he'd brought his family along.

She never complained. She didn't even have complaining thoughts. But her shadow did. Her shadow got to be one big knot of gloom and hungers, like a pot-bound houseplant with its roots all sickly and tangled together. Shadows are like plants. They need sunlight simply to exist. They need to feel the air stir around them. They need to feel something physical — a bug will do — light down from time to time and rub against them. Plants like a nice squirt of birdshit that'll leach down into their dirt, and our shadows have equivalent needs. They have hungers and daydreams and vague longings for what they think would be freedom. Usually, those daydreams come to nothing, like most people's, but that doesn't matter, so long as there is some kind of input. They can get along on next to nothing. TV will serve their purpose most of the time, just like for people. Shadows may not have much of a life of their own, but what they can see on TV supplies that basic lack. But Angie didn't watch much TV. Wythe Lane wasn't wired for cable, and the channels she could receive didn't show anything but foul language and violence. That would have suited her shadow fine, of course, but it was Angie who was in control of on and off. Shadows are usually helpless in that regard.

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It finally reached the point where the only time Angie or her shadow ever stirred from the house was on Sunday mornings and, sometimes, on Wednesday evenings, when Angie's friend Lucille would pick her up and take her to the United Baptist Church in Chambersville. Lucille had been a beautician before she was married, so she also did Angie's hair and nails every two or three weeks, at Angie's home, after the Wednesday prayer meeting.

Angie's shadow was always keenly attentive to everything that Lucille said or did during the beauty treatments. Those Wednesdays were the high points of the shadow's limited life, and probably of Angie's as well. So when Lucille brought up the subject of *The Throne of Darkness* Angie's shadow was transfixed. It began to vibrate like a tuning fork that's heard the vibration it's been designed to pick up.

The Throne of Darkness was a paperback book by Cassandra Knye that Lucille had checked out, with four other paperbacks, from the Chambersville Municipal Library. Lucille had had a long-standing grievance with the library's book selection process and with the chief librarian, Edward Holme, but *The Throne of Darkness* represented something worse than anything up to now, an assault against the moral well-being of the entire community, especially the children. It was a threat that had to be met head on, and so Lucille was circulating a petition to have the book, and a number of others just like it, taken off the library shelves. Everyone at the prayer meeting had signed Lucille's petition, even Pastor Raines, though he'd refused to let Lucille read aloud the most offensive passages from the book, since they were there in the church basement.

But Lucille insisted on reading one of those passages now, while they waited for the tint to take. "Listen to this part, just listen. 'Locking herself away from the curious stares and whispers of the others, Sister Rosemond began to fear herself. She couldn't sleep, and when she did the figure of Ariston would appear before her robed in white with golden sandals on his feet. The sands of the desert eddied about him, as though obedient to his will. She, too, was obedient to his will. Nude and wet, she walked toward him across the burning sand. His arms embraced her, his lips parted in an obscene invitation. He drew away his white robe to reveal his grotesque nakedness and threw her down across — '"

"Please," said Angie. "Please don't read any more. It's just too.... I wish you wouldn't."

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"It gets worse," Lucille promised.

"I'm sure it does."

"But you can see, just from that much, that it's Satanism pure and simple. And any child can walk into that library and check out the book." There was no getting her off it, and Angie had to sit there while Lucille finished with her hair and listen to it all, how children were playing a game called Dungeons and Dragons and then committing suicide, and how there were books in the library along the same lines. How there were crimes that the police couldn't explain. Children who were missing. Pets dying mysteriously. On and on. Finally Angie had to claim a headache and ask Lucille to leave without doing her nails.

When Lucille was gone, Angie went on sitting in the middle of the kitchen with the queerest feeling inside her. She looked down at her hands, where they were resting on her knees, and they looked wrong, all wrinkled and knobby and discolored. Roy used to joke that her name was really Angina at times like that when she'd sit off by herself, not saying anything, claiming a headache. Which wasn't true, the name on her birth certificate was Angelica, but no one had ever called her by that name in her entire adult life. Roy said it made her sound like a Catholic.

While she sat there, with the peculiar feeling, her shadow was breaking loose. Shadows usually can't do that. Most of them always stay fastened to the people they're born with. Only if the person gets very weak and the shadow gets strong at the same time can the shadow break loose, and then the person usually dies soon after. You can see them like that in hospitals sometimes, though it mostly goes unnoticed, or misunderstood. People sitting by the bed may think a light comes into the person's eyes just before they die, but it's actually the reverse. Their shadows have left them, so their eyes look brighter for a little while before they finally go cloudy and dull at the very end.

Angie's shadow had been gaining strength all the while Lucille had been reading from *The Throne of Darkness*. When Lucille had taken her leave, she'd left the book behind, thinking Angie might look at it while she was by herself. Angie hadn't even noticed the book sitting there on the kitchen counter, but her shadow had.

Her shadow wanted to know more about Rosamond and Ariston, but from where Angie was sitting only the spine was visible, not the picture

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on the cover. So there was a kind of tug of war between Angie's feeling of queerness and her shadow's feeling, which was simpler and stronger, and finally it was her shadow who won. It broke loose, and now it was Angie who was helpless and her shadow who could move around and do things.

The shadow went over to the kitchen counter and looked at the cover of *The Throne of Darkness*. There was Ariston, his face all red but with deep shadows, as though he were standing above a bonfire, and there was Rosamond in a red silk gown that matched Ariston's face. Yes, the shadow thought. I'm so hungry. I want....

But that was as far as it could get. It couldn't think what it was it wanted. It opened the book and turned some pages, but that didn't help. Shadows can't read. Once they tear loose from people, shadows can get pretty stupid. They are like cockroaches, hungry and restless.

The shadow remembered the Buick sitting in the garage. Tom had tried to get his mother to sell the car to a dealer he knew, but when she'd proved stubborn about that, Tom didn't insist. He respected her feelings, and besides he figured the car would be his soon enough — a vintage 1976 Buick with low mileage and not a flake of rust. So each time he'd come back to Wythe Lane, he'd futzed with the car, keeping it tuned and polished. An investment.

Angie's shadow got the keys from the kitchen drawer and went out to the garage and started up the Buick and backed it straight into the garage door. Each of the four little panes of glass in the door was cracked, but they didn't shatter. The shadow didn't know quite what to do. It tried to raise the garage door, but it had got stuck to the Buick's bumper. It got back into the car and put it into Drive and managed to tear the back bumper off the car. And that was it for the Buick. Its battery was dead. The shadow wasn't too stupid to understand that.

At that point Angie's shadow gave up on any idea of having a night on the town and went for a walk in the night air, which was freedom enough after all the time it had sat beside Angie in the house, doing nothing and wishing Angie were dead. It walked through the nearest back yards, setting a few dogs to barking, and then along a drainage ditch, where it finally fell asleep beside a cyclone fence designed to keep the neighborhood children from wandering onto the highway. Shadows need their sleep the same as people.

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The shadow was awake and back in charge at the first glimmer of direct sunlight. For someone who had spent the night in a drainage ditch Angie looked in pretty good shape. Her metabolism had risen to the occasion, and though she was stiff in all her limbs, once her shadow had got her on her feet and brushed off the dead leaves, she looked like any other old lady standing in a drainage ditch at five A.M. on a May morning. Ordinarily just that would have been unusual and embarrassing enough to have incapacitated Angie, but the shadow had no compunctions about the neighbors and what they might have thought. It was aware of them, but only as a cockroach might be aware of the jars and boxes in the cupboard it inhabits, as potential sources of what it needed.

One of the neighbors in question appeared before the shadow now, Natalie, Mrs. Deaver's teenage daughter. She said, "Mrs. Sweetwater — you're up early."

The shadow smiled, and extended Angie's hand to be shaken. It said, "Could I have a cigarette." When there was no immediate response, it remembered to add, "Please."

"A cigarette? I'm afraid I don't smoke. I didn't think *you* did either, Mrs. Sweetwater."

"I used to. Then I didn't for a while. Now I'm a smoker again." The shadow smiled its most plausible smile, but it resolved, even as Natalie politely disengaged and started jogging again, not to risk another such encounter. The strain of pretending to be even such a simple creature as Angie Sweetwater was too taxing.

The shadow returned along Wythe Lane to Angie's little brick house, drawn there by its memory of something on the kitchen counter. And it was there still, unemptied, the ash tray in which Lucille had stubbed out her three cigarettes last night. One of the things that Angie, and her shadow, had enjoyed about Lucille's Wednesday visits was that Lucille was a smoker. Roy had been a smoker, too, and Angie had been as addicted to his second-hand smoke as Roy had been to it at first-hand. "I like how it smells," she would tell people when they asked her if they could smoke when they visited.

She even liked the smell of these old butts in the ashtray, or her shadow did. It bent low over the little square of stippled amber glass and took a deep, luxuriating whiff. Shadows have a special affinity for the

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other side of anything, its inverse, or obverse, or opposite. Not just whatever lies in darkness, but the dregs and refuse and wreckage that is left behind by floods or fires, the ashes in the grate, the fumes that linger in a garage or a basement. They take to such things by the same simple tropism that makes plants strain toward the sun or attracts bees to bright colors.

While certain complex tasks would have been beyond the shadow's limited competence (it could not have done the laundry, for instance, or made the bed), the shadow did understand that to smoke one of the butts from the ashtray it would have to be able to light it. But it could not think where Angie kept the matches, since she so infrequently had need of them that using them was not an ingrained habit, an automatism that came with the vehicle. It stood there stymied and peevish until it realized (it would probably have taken Angie as long to do so) that the stove could be used as a cigarette lighter.

It turned on the right front burner, and then, positioning the cigarette in Angie's pouted lips, stooped to get a light. It took care not to let anything but the splayed tip of the butt get close to the flame. At the first sting of smoke it drew back and savored the vaporized poisons of Lucille's Salem.

The very qualities that made tobacco lethal to human health made it dear to the shadow, but even so the tissues of Angie's throat, unused to the tickle of the smoke, reacted badly. The shadow could not stop coughing, but neither could it resist another drag of mentholated smoke, nor a third, though by then the coughing had become violent, a convulsion. It flicked the cigarette across the kitchen, a bull's-eye into the plastic garbage can beside the sink. Angie herself would not have been so accurate. In many ways her shadow was more comfortable in her skin than she.

While Angie's lungs recovered from their coughing fit in the platform rocker in the living room, the cigarette smoldered inside the garbage can, as it was engineered to do. A single wadded Kleenex caught fire, and flared, and, as it died, relayed its flame to the dry corner of an otherwise damp paper towel. Those flames in turn reached the crumpled cellophane that had been a cookie wrapper, after which, the entire contents of the can became a torch, the flames of which rose high enough to ignite the roll of towels in the dispenser and then the kitchen curtains and the flounce above.

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From where it sat in the living room the shadow could not see the fire in the kitchen until it had spread beyond the area around the sink. Even when it became aware of what was happening it did not bestir itself to phone for help. Indeed, its impulse was rather to feed the flames than to damp them, from a sense that they were its own. Anyone who has built a great leaf-fire and seen the flames leap high has felt a similar vanity. It is our own shadow's rapture we share at such a moment, its sense of itself as something immense and unbounded, the shadow in mad-emperor mode.

As the flames spread through the house, flitting among those things most flammable, they also kindled scraps of psychic tinder in Angie's own sere soul. For it was she, not the shadow, who began to hum "Some Enchanted Evening," which long ago, at a bar in Orlando, Florida, a pianist had sung to her at Roy's particular request on their fourth anniversary. Somehow this May morning, as she sat in her burning house, the dear old tune seemed the key to her whole life. The melody seemed endless, with no point along the way she could stop at, so that finally it was the shadow and not Angie who had to take the initiative and stagger up from the rocker and out the front door, almost invisible by then behind the billowing black smoke.

While the neighbors gathered to watch the arrival of the firemen and their losing battle, Angie sat on the other side of Wythe Lane, sprawled in an Adirondack chair, a spectator at her own disaster, yet as little distressed as if it had been a crisis on the evening news, a war in West Africa or riots at the Mexican border.

The shadow, meanwhile, gorging on the fire's triumph was in a state of comatose surfeit, like a tick swollen with blood. When the emergency medical team showed up, it was determined, after Angie didn't answer their questions and they had filled out the appropriate forms, that she was in a state of shock. To spare everyone the discomfort of her inappropriate and weird lack of affect, Angie was sedated and taken off in the EMT ambulance.

When the sedative had worn off, Angie continued to pose a problem for the staff at Mercy Hospital, for she would not remain in her bed in the recovery ward (a temporary assignment) but would go wandering through

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the halls and lobby, confused and querulous. She couldn't understand why her clothes had been taken from her and she had nothing to wear but a paper examination gown that left her backside bare.

Anger was not an emotion in Angie's usual repertory. She could do nothing but weep and ask to talk with her son in Tacoma. But Angie could not remember his number, which was unlisted. The shadow, still gorged, did nothing to help, nor could it have. It let her dither about in the public areas of the hospital and make a fuss like an ill-tempered pet locked in a parked car.

By the time Tom was contacted and had got to the hospital, Angie had calmed down, and the shadow had again assumed control. It lay in the hospital bed and glowered dully at Tom and the various strangers who had questions about the fire. Once or twice it had asked for a cigarette, but this produced no response except, from Tom, a suspicious string of questions.

The hospital's diagnosis, which Tom did not think to question, was advanced Alzheimer's. Tom did not want to complicate his life by bringing his mother back to Tacoma with him. To what purpose? She couldn't be trusted under his family's roof, even if his wife would have accepted that idea, since Angie had probably been responsible for the fire that had destroyed her own house. A neighbor's daughter had seen Angie wandering about in a dazed manner on the morning of the fire, and at the hospital they had had to use restraints to keep her in her own bed. It was a sad situation, but not really that unusual.

For Alzheimer's the standard solution was a nursing home and then an averted gaze. Living at a great distance might actually be an advantage — out of sight, out of mind. And so, before Tom returned to Tacoma, Angie was taken to live at Raines Adult Home outside of Chambersville. The home was operated by Amos Raines, a cousin of the pastor of United Baptist, which made it seem not quite as heartless as leaving Mrs. Sweetwater with complete strangers. She would have her own room, and Tom was introduced to two of the other female residents, who were sufficiently self-possessed to shake his mother's hand and, with prompting, to say hello to her.

However, those two ladies, Mrs. Filbin and Mrs. Lynch, were about all the establishment could show for itself in terms of good P.R. The other residents, six males and three females, had been placed there by

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Chambersville Psychiatric Center under an adult care contract with the state. Basically, the Psychiatric Center used Raines Adult Home as a storage facility for its most hopeless geriatric cases, those with diagnoses, like Angie, of advanced Alzheimer's. Most of them were also like Angie in being under the control of their shadows, a not uncommon condition among those in nursing homes. Indeed, just as certain insects and the orchids that imitate them have coevolved over the centuries so that their resemblance becomes ever more congruent, so shadows have co-evolved with those genuine behavioral disorders which offer them an alibi and a disguise — Alzheimer's commonly, but also autism, bipolar disorders, and some forms of schizophrenia.

It was not only Angie and other residents of the Raines Adult Home who were ruled by their shadows; so were two of the employees, the twin brothers Wilbur and Orville Halfacre. The Halfacres had spent almost their entire lives in institutional care, first, when abandoned in infancy, as recipients, now as dispersers. They were neither of them very bright, but they had both earned high school equivalency diplomas and gone on to receive training as medical technicians, and, in Wilbur's case, as a cosmetologist. Thus, they were qualified to minister to the needs of the home's residents, and the residents, in turn, met theirs.

Angie became the Halfacres' particular favorite, chiefly because there was something unusually docile in the way she submitted to male sexual demands. That had been so with Roy, who had tried to encourage her to play a more active and responsive role in their conjugal relations. It was even more the case with the Halfacres, who had spent some time in custody in their teenage years for practicing necrophilia. Because of their age there had been no permanent record of that unfortunate episode, but during the time they spent in a supervised environment their shadows had became ascendant in their lives. That they should become employees in such a place as Raines Adult Home had been almost inevitable, shadows being drawn to other shadows in the way that insects swarm about light bulbs. If it had not been the home, it would have been one of the local prisons, or a school of Special Education.

Such were the Halfacres. For we may as well speak of their shadows as though they *were* the Halfacres, and of Angie's shadow as though she and it were the same entity, for when a shadow has long been in command,

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the conventional boundaries between self and shadow blur and become unimportant. Who shall say that a particular crime was the work of someone's shadow or her own? More than once in her years at the home Angie's shadow committed an opportunistic act of malice (accidents are so common among the elderly), and the other resident shadows did the same, or tried to. Had her role ever been discovered, Angie could have protested that she was innocent, that she could not remember having released the switch or pulled the plug, and she might have passed a polygraph test when she testified to that effect. But increasingly Angie remembered nothing that she did, as her mind continued its long slow fade to gray. In such cases innocence becomes a semantic quibble, as it is so often in courts of law.

When shadows dominate those who are young and virile, like the Halfacres, their control has a different character than with someone like Angie. The shadows of the robust must give their hosts a freer rein, so that they can play an active role in the everyday world — at a job or a gym, on the highway, in a bar — and still be on call, as it were, for the shadow to command. These are the shadows who become momentarily notorious for some impulsive and seemingly motiveless crime, pushing a stranger in front of a train or shooting another driver in a fit of "road rage." Working at the home, the shadows of the Halfacre boys had achieved a modus vivendi that made such extreme outbursts unnecessary. Like children taking ritalin or diabetics protected by insulin, the Halfacres got along from day to day with the calming assistance of their own private harem, among whom Angie, as the most recent arrival and sturdiest, figured as odalisque-in-chief, a golden-age and mute Scheherazade.

Even for a genuine Alzheimer's victim, someone too out of it to resent having no other wardrobe than a blanket and adult diapers, the Adult Home might have seemed a sorry fate. Angie did have moments unattended by her shadow when she became conscious of the horror of her circumstances. Orville or Wilbur would be spooning cubes of Jell-O into her mouth (to their credit, they kept their charges clean and well-nourished), and she would be overwhelmed by a sense of abasement that made it impossible to swallow the food. Tears would run down her heavily rouged cheeks (Wilbur used his cosmetology training to keep his old ladies looking nice), and Wilbur would pause in his duties until the fit had passed

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and her feeding could resume. Surely, the oblivion of complete submission to her own shadow would have been preferred to such nightmare flickers of self-awareness.

As well to wish for death, however. Oblivion is never one of our options. Half of all Adult Homes would stand empty if one could just wish away unremitting misery and pain. Africa would be depopulated, along with all the prisons in Texas.

But who is to say there is no joy in Africa or in the prisons of Texas? Or none in the life of Angie Sweetwater, at least in her life as a shadow? She enjoyed good physical health, the attentions of two devoted admirers, and an uncommonly long life. When she was dressed for public display and it was her turn to be taken to a Sunday morning service at United Baptist, everyone agreed that Angie Sweetwater was the most presentable and best behaved of any of the visitors from the home. Sometimes just this mite of respect was all the comfort she required. At other times she would remember what churches were for and she would fold her hands and pray for her deliverance.

And you must pray along with her, good people, and hope to die before the same thing happens to you. For it makes no difference whether you are rich or poor, a homeless beggar or an ex-president, like Ronald Reagan. Like Angie, we all have shadows. Stand in the light and you will see your own.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

AIEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

INSPIRED BY Brian Aldiss's vignette, "Supertoys Last All Summer Long," based (loosely, I assume) on a screen story by Ian Watson, Steven Spielberg's latest pretension, *AI*, began its cinematic life as a project of the late Stanley Kubrick, who decided — against Aldiss's advice — to transform the story of an artificially intelligent child unloved by its mum into a retelling of *Pinocchio*. In the hands of a great filmmaker, especially one of Kubrick's cold, meticulous sensibility, the movie might have avoided the excess of sentimentality inherent in the idea; but when Spielberg — who never met a button he failed to push — inherited the project and then rewrote the script, it was pre-ordained that the spirit of cutesy-poo would be invoked to the max, and some big-eyed waif like a Keane child come to life would be chosen to embody the The Machine Who Wants To Be A Real Boy, and that at some point said big-eyed waif would be depicted staring with "Aw, goshes!" awe up into white Jesuslight, and everybody in the theater would either be sobbing or getting sick in the aisles.

Pray to be among the latter. To weep during a film by St. Spielberg, to surrender to the entirely unsubtle manipulations of the most crassly commercial, hanky-drenching, family values-humping *faux-auteur* in the history of the universe.... Well, it's just not a good sign. Choosing big stories with broad appeal has always been a Spielberg strength, and early in his career, it appeared that this, along with his technical imagination, might produce that rarest of breeds: a commercial director capable of making films of a certain quality. But somewhere

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along the way, Spielberg's artistic instincts went soft, his epic sensibility betrayed him, and he began to make films in which easy sentiment was penciled in for honest, earned emotion. Commercially speaking, this was a canny decision, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with making commercial movies; but Spielberg's films have achieved such a potent level of commerciality, he now bestrides the world of the studios like a vast, rather goatlike colossus, having become both figurehead and the leading exponent of a machine that churns out tasty-looking, brain-deadening garbage masquerading as art and funnels it down the throats of a burgeoning race of Homer Simpsons who — having been nourished on such garbage — have predictably grown increasingly brain-dead and eager for more. Why Spielberg threw away his abilities as an artist and evolved into the Pope of Professional Pandering, the Titan of Tearjerking, the Mister Please Please Please the Lowest Common Denominator himself, I have no idea. Some will tell you it was due to the fit of pique he suffered after *Close Encounters* was shunned by the Academy. Shamed and reviled, unloved, he wandered the streets of lower Hollywood for days, preaching the gospel to whomever would listen, targeted by brickbats and the laughter of whores, until at last, despairing, he stood on a sewer grating with rank steam rising up around him, muttered a Cabalistic spell, and was subsumed into the lower orders of the Damned. Now I don't altogether buy into this story — I've also heard it was his mother's cousin, Max, who advised Stevie to forget all that dreck about quality and go for the loot. But whatever the case, a close examination of his recent films testifies that some degrading influence is at work. I submit as evidence the regrettable *Amistad*, being Steven's filmic assertion that slavery was very likely immoral, and containing one of the worst casting decisions in the history of cinema, that of signing to the role of a Pre-Revolutionary lawyer Matthew McConaughey, the worst actor of his generation; *Saving Private Ryan*, which is essentially an episode of the old TV show *Combat* with an okay Grand Guignol beginning and a mawkish framing device, and features the Mister Potato Head of contemporary thespians, Tom Hanks; the ludicrously over-hyped *Schindler's List*, which should be on no one's list of decent Holocaust movies, a Grade C picture with

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Grade A cinematography, another mawkish framing device, and little sad kiddies staring up into light — a film to which we owe a special debt of hatred for giving us yet another half-baked British ham whose acting is all accent and wan looks, the woefully one-dimensional Ralph Fiennes.

The most astonishing thing about *AI*, this worst of Spielberg's major films, is how uninvolving it is. Spielberg's work generally achieves a level of competence that enlists tearful reactions even from those who have no sympathy for what he is trying to do. But *AI*'s characters are so simplistically drawn and ploddingly stated, it is impossible to identify with them, despite Spielberg's use of somber lighting and misted eyes and a multitude of other tricks designed to pluck at our heartstrings. The situation of the film is this: Martin (Jake Thomas), the only son of Monica and Henry Swinton (Frances O'Connor and Sam Robards), has been afflicted with an incurable disease and is now in cryo-sleep awaiting a cure that may never come. To ameliorate Monica's despondency, Henry brings home a robot child, David (Haley Joel Osment), who is the first robot ever programmed to love, the creation of Professor Alan Hobby (William Hurt). Monica is at first horrified, but gradually comes to love David. However, when a miracle cure is found for Martin's affliction and he returns home, he becomes jealous of David and through lies and subterfuge manages to convince Henry that David is dangerous and must be returned to the manufacturer, where he will be destroyed. Monica, unable to bring herself to kill her ersatz li'l punkin', drops David off in the woods along with his teddy bear, a Supertoy capable of movement, speech, and a wisdom more profound than that of any human being (or robot, for that matter) in the movie. David is almost immediately captured by the agents of a Flesh Fair — an entertainment spectacle in which robots are destroyed in a variety of colorful ways all in the name of human supremacy. After a thoroughly unlikely escape, off David goes in the company of another escapee, Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), a love robot who has been framed for murder by the husband of one of the women he services.

To this point, Spielberg has been ineffectually aping Kubrick's cold style of cinematography, but once Joe and David and Teddy get together, we're in another movie, a very familiar one — it's *The Wizard of Oz*, with Joe playing Tin Man to David's Dorothy, as they and the

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teddy bear search for the Blue Fairy who — according to the Pinocchio text David has read — will transform him into a real boy. Their journey leads them to Rouge City, a future Las Vegas which seems somewhat less futuristic in design than its Twenty-First Century counterpart. There David consults Dr. Know, the cartoonish hologram that represents a data bank, and is told that he will have to go "to the end of the world where the lions weep." He and Joe steal a police jetcopter and off they go to a nearly submerged Manhattan (the ice caps have melted), where David learns that the information he gained from Dr. Know was planted by his creator, Professor Hobby, in order to lure him back (why Hobby's employees didn't retrieve him themselves is not quite clear). Depressed on learning from Professor Hobby that there is no Blue Fairy, David throws himself into the sea. He is rescued by Joe, who is subsequently captured by the police and whisked away to his judgment. David thereupon takes the copter and, with Teddy in the passenger seat, goes back down underwater and eventually finds a statue of the Blue Fairy in the submerged ruins of Coney Island. Shortly after he finds the statue, David and Teddy are trapped when a submerged steel structure collapses, pinning the copter.

If Spielberg had chosen to end the movie at this point, with David staring gloomily at his eidolon, his dream of real boyhood unattainable and his hoped-for miracle maker forever just out of reach, I would be inclined to rate *AI* as just another lame sci-fi movie with excellent special effects (courtesy of Stan Winston). But in his wisdom, our boy Steve has tacked on a thirty-four-minute-long ending involving the freezing over of the entire planet in 2000 years, the extinction of humanity, a visitation of saintly elongated beings (aliens? mecha? puppets?) who just love love love our music and our art (Sheesh!), resurrection for David and his moms, and a denouement whose maudlin excess is so execrable that it nearly blinds one to its underlying message, which appears to be a resounding endorsement of child suicide. "Lame" does not apply here. Nor does bad, crappy, unpalatable, disgusting, or any other word I can think of. Spielberg's molestation of the Pinoccho story demands an entire new vocabulary of villification to describe its primal lousiness adequately. One wonders how even cheerleader-type review services such as *Sixty Second Previews* could lap up this puddle of Technicolor barf and spit forth a nugget of praise.

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And one has to wonder even more what could possibly have induced relatively credible critics to lavish praise upon it. It may be that DreamWorks arranged for happy dust to be slipped into their popcorn.

Or something.

What *AI* is about, really, is not whether Haley Joel cute machine lad is or ever will be a gen-u-wine boy. Naw, it's about marketing a pile of saccharine glop as the work of a Master, about combining the right mix of mushy strings with a sad wittle pookie guy and a cold unfriendly world and then just when you think it's all so mean and nothin's fair.... Whammo! A b.s. transcendant ending and a soaring theme that will send a kazillion or so tear-stained hairless monkeys streaming toward the exits believing they have thought something, when actually all that has happened is that they have paid eight to twelve bucks.

It may seem that I'm being too hard on America's most talented billionaire, and maybe I am. I'm sure that Steve's a prince of a guy with a Cinemascope-sized heart who doubtless spoonfeeds his children the same vitaminless pap he feeds the world. But he's no less a schlockmeister for all that, and to anyone who believes the radical notion that entertainment should not be absent of intelligence and should have at its core a soul, a passion, and not a happy face painted on a balloon, and that stories can be told in which the noble and the inspiring are expressed honestly, vigorously, in terms of the common measure of the human spirit, without resorting to the Welch Men's Chorus humming a glorioso passage in the background to cue our tears.... To anyone who feels this way, Spielberg must be considered the high priest of whatever god it is that has risen from the ashes of literature and art to inundate civilization with its vomitus. Every cretinoid producer and director in Hollywood who worships at the Mel Gibson Memorial Blockbuster Temple of Explosive Faith has a statue of Spielberg on his or her mantle and each night sacrifices a virgin cockroach in hopes that someday they too may become a demiurge. In other words, He (along with His chief minions Robert Zemeckis, the perpetrator of *Forrest Gump*, and Chris Columbus, the auteur responsible for *The Bicentennial Man*) is spawning others like himself. I know I'm only talking about a crummy film director, an ordinary guy named Steve, but seriously, folks, if you care about maintaining literacy or having your grandkids

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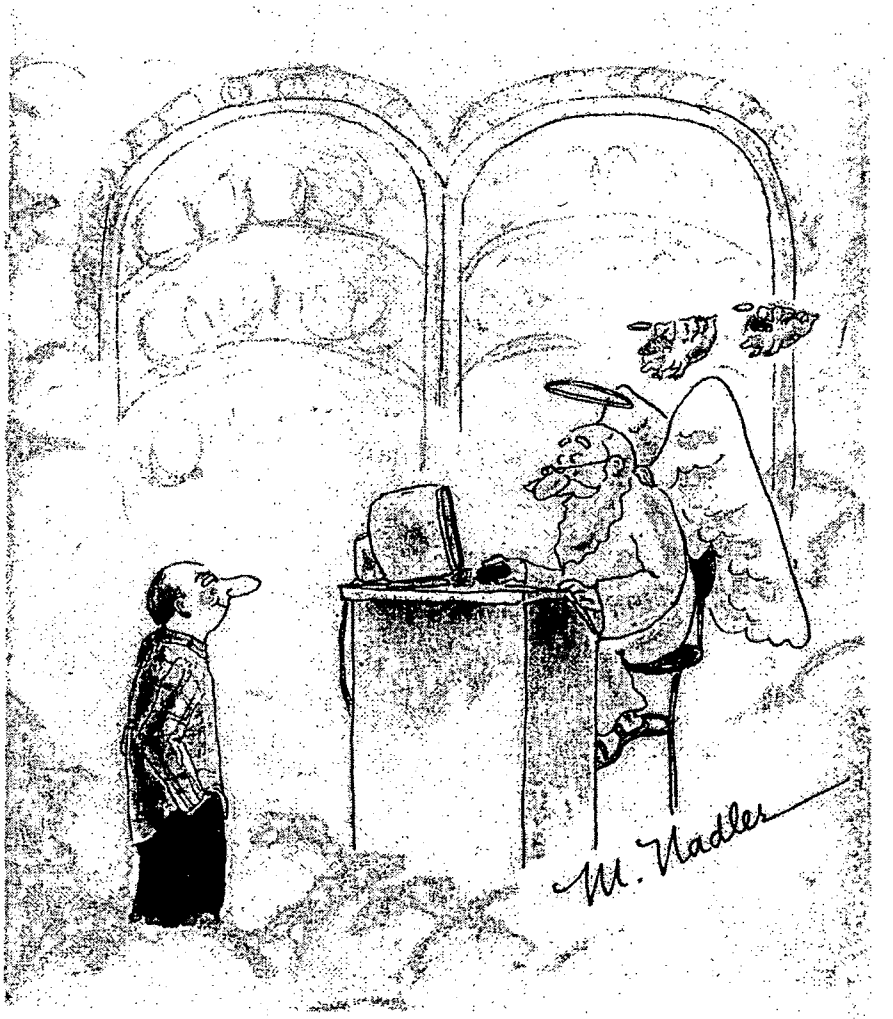
grow up in a society where books can be found outside museums, or even if you merely want to take up rational thought as a hobby, for all intents and purposes, His name might just as well be Legion.



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Michael Libling lives in Montreal, where he has worked for years writing speeches and advertising copy. A student of the late Mordecai Richler, Mr. Libling turns occasionally to the form of fiction. He tends to write tales from the darker side of life, usually featuring young characters. This new one will likely prove hard to forget.

Timmy Gobel's Bug Jar

By Michael Libling

NOBODY REMEMBERS Addison anymore. And not just because so much like misery has passed our way since. No, I blame the Russians. I mean, it was the same day they sent Yuri Gagarin into space, so Addison was pretty much pushed to the back pages. The whole world fell for the diversion. Who wouldn't? It's not like Addison was something anybody wanted to talk about, after all. I can vouch for that firsthand; I've told the whole story only once. But that doesn't mean I don't remember. Every time I turn on Brokaw or pick up a *Sun-Times* or think of my sister, Meggie, I remember. I sure as hell remember.

April 12, 1961. The three of us huddled about that bug jar as if it were a crystal ball, revealing the shape of our respective things to come. And though it was, in fact, neither made of crystal nor imbued with any mystic foresight, it did in its own way portend our futures. At the bottom of the jar, among the carcasses of crickets, grasshoppers and anonymous creepy-crawlies, lay the tiniest of skeletons — a human skeleton too, so it appeared, though none of us had much of a handle on anatomy.

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"Where's the head?" Werner wanted to know. "It doesn't have a friggin' head." Howie Werner. Three seconds on the scene and a total pain-in-the-ass as usual.

"By the moss," Timmy pointed. "It must've rolled away when I took it down." The jar had been sitting on a shelf in Timmy Gobel's shed since the previous summer. "See it? See it?"

"Wow, friggin' tiny, eh?"

"Yeah," said Timmy, "friggin' is right."

I nodded in agreement. I was tall even then, though a lot thinner, and splattered with more freckles than any single kid deserved. But being big didn't make any difference. The skeleton so creeped me out, I could not speak. Nor could I let on. Not with Werner around. If he sensed the slightest weakness, I would never hear the end of it. Still, I could not turn away from the jar.

"Wait a sec!" Werner snorted, eyes bulging like he'd just found the secret to life. "Wait just one friggin' second!" And there it was, that dreaded hee-haw, his lips and gums and teeth screwed up tight like some donkey snout in an overcinched bridle, that grating laugh that just begged to be silenced with a fist to the face. "You got us, Gobe. You got us good, man. So where'd you get it, anyhow? Cracker Jacks? Neat. Real neat."

"No, I swear. I thought that too — that somebody was pulling a fast one on me. Like it broke off a key chain or something. But it's real, I'm sure." Timmy raised his magnifying glass to the jar. It had come with the stamp collecting kit his grandmother had sent for his eleventh birthday, but this was the first time he had used it for anything other than barbecuing ants or branding hockey pads. "Look, around its middle, see...."

I put my eye right up to it and pulled back just as fast; a tad slower and I might well have puked.

"And at the back of the head...see...see...," Timmy directed.

"Jesus!" Werner didn't look too well himself. "Looks like...uh...," he gulped, "rotting guts...and...uh...Jesus...hair and stuff.... What the hell is it, Gobe? You bump off a friggin' leprechaun?"

Timmy shook his head, shrugged.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, if it's an elf you got lyin' in there, you could be up for murder one, Gobe!" That was the good part about having

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Werner around — putting up with his crap was inevitably rewarded with his cockeyed take on things. If he wasn't getting on your nerves, Werner made you laugh. And even the slightest sign of approval would cause him to follow through with a litany of adlibbed hits and misses. One could almost hear his brain working, if not his sense of logic. "Or what if some headshrinker from the jungle or somewhere shrunk some guy's body? And then tossed it out of a plane flying over?"

"Huh?"

"Or maybe it's one of those African pygmies. Like in that dumb Tarzan movie."

"Anybody ever tell you you're nuts, Werner?" It was not the first time Timmy had posed the question. "Pygmies are small, but not that small. And headshrinkers? Jesus!"

"Besides," I said, voice barely above a whisper, "wouldn't there be a spear or something in there with him?"

"What if there is? Let's take a closer look...." Werner reached for the jar, but Timmy fended him off.

"Back off, asshole! You'll wreck him up. Look what happened to his head."

"Maybe it didn't roll away," I suggested, every word a chore. "Maybe the grasshopper bit it off."

"Yeah!" Werner cut in. "Maybe you didn't see him, Gobe, 'cause he was *inside* the grasshopper. Maybe the grasshopper had swallowed him whole, just before you caught it."

"Except I don't think grasshoppers eat meat," I corrected, careful not to overstate the point.

"Then maybe it was a costume. Maybe he was dressed up like a grasshopper, you know, for Halloween or whatever?"

"You're saying he was going trick-or-treating, dressed like a grasshopper? Jesus, Werner, even if he could reach the doorbell, he'd no sooner ring it than some jerk would step on him." A moment of silence followed before we realized what Timmy had said. We collapsed onto the grass, aching with laughter.

"Or what...what...," Werner howled, "...what if they're Martians...dressed up like...like...like friggin' grasshoppers to fool us?"

"It's a friggin' Martian grasshopper invasion!" cried Timmy. "Run!

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Run for your lives!" He flipped to his feet. "The Martians are coming! The Martians are coming!"

"Yeah," I grinned, "Martians."

IT TOOK a long while before we got back on track. Oddly, it was I who broke the silence, an occurrence only slightly less rare than finding a tiny skeleton at the bottom of a bug jar. Eyes riveted to my PF Flyers, heels perpendicular, I spoke softly, tentatively. "What if it's your conscience, Gobe?" I thought for sure we'd all crack up again — me included. I thought for sure I'd come up with one as good as any Werner could muster. But Timmy looked like he'd just been handed a fistful of liver.

"My what?"

"You know, your conscience," I repeated, hoping they'd pick up on my grin. Hell, it was a big grin too. "The little guy inside your head who tells you right from wrong." I swallowed, sighed. It wasn't the first time this had happened; people never seemed to catch on when I was pulling their leg.

"Huh? You mean like in cartoons? Like the little devil who sits on your shoulder?"

"Yeah, sort of, I guess. I was thinking that maybe he fell out of your ear when you were bug hunting or whatever." I was about to tell them I was only kidding, but then Werner jammed his thumbs up into his armpits and began flapping his elbows, squawking saliva into my face.

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" I swatted him away. "Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

Timmy scratched his head, weighing the latest theory. "But if I don't have a conscience — I mean, if I've lost mine — and if I've been without one since that guy got stuck in the jar, wouldn't I have been doing a whole bunch of bad things since then? I don't think I have, have I?"

It had come this far, now I felt obliged to take it all the way. "That's just it, Gobe. If this little guy is your conscience, you wouldn't have any way of knowing if you've been doing bad things, because you wouldn't have any conscience to tell you."

"But you guys would know if I was doing bad stuff, 'cause I probably would've done some of it to you — and definitely to Werner. And have I? Have I been doing bad stuff?"

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"Oh, yeah," Werner declared, slapping his sides, "tons of it. Robbed a bank. Spray-painted 'fuck you' all over the school. Swiped some cars. Jerked off on Meggie Patterson's boobs — "

"Shut up," I stammered, face red, fingers pressed into fists. I hated when they talked about my sister like that. Heck, I hated when they talked about her at all.

"Jesus, Gobe, you're not really listening to this nut case, are you? This conscience bullshit makes about as much sense as my pygmy."

"Shut up, will ya, Werner? For one friggin' second, just shut the hell up and let me think." Timmy might as well have been talking to the damn wall for all Werner seemed to care. The more you wanted him to clam up, the more he prattled on.

"Well, I can tell you one thing, Gobe, if there's some little guy running around inside my head, telling me what to do, I'm going to get me the biggest damn Q-tip I can find...."

Perhaps it was in the delivery, maybe that's why the three of us were on the grass again, done in by Werner's latest quip. There was just something funny about *the way* Werner said things, not *what* he said.

After that, the theorizing and speculation pretty much withered away. We hit the wall, so to speak. Just plain stumped. Clearly, a higher authority was called for.

"Mr. Schwartz? Or how about Miss Corcoran?" Werner suggested.

Timmy shook his head. "Uh-uh. No teachers." School never did sit too well with Timmy. This was in the days before terms like "learning disability" and "attention deficit disorder" were bandied about — before Ritalin made the menu alongside milk and cookies. So it came down to your basic standoff on pretty much a daily basis; he didn't take to teachers and they didn't take to him. Hell, he didn't take to anyone over the age of twenty. Later, when hippies were warning us to never trust anyone over thirty, I'd often think of Timmy Gobel and how he was so far ahead of his time. "Uh-uh. No friggin' teachers."

That's when I offered up Meggie. Just like that. I hadn't meant to, swear to God. But the words were on my tongue and out of my mouth before I knew what I was saying. "She's really good at science and stuff. Got that scholarship and...."

"Yeah, Meggie," Werner seconded, dancing around like he'd just

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scored a touchdown. Any excuse to be near Meggie was good enough for him. But to me, his enthusiasm was downright stomach-wrenching.

I was pretty sure that Timmy was excited about the prospect of Meggie too, but he had the good sense to keep his feelings in check. He also saw a downside. "I don't know if Meggie is such a good idea. Then your Mom will find out, and once parents get involved...."

"Yeah," Werner groaned. "They'll mess everything up. That jar is ours."

"Mine," Timmy corrected. "It's my jar."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

"My folks are away until Sunday," I said. "And I don't think Meggie will say a word. My Mom's always complaining how Meggie doesn't tell her anything."

"Yeah, okay then. Meggie it is." That was another thing I picked up about Timmy. He always seemed to worry about coming off looking like a kid in front of Meggie, even if that's what he was compared to her; we were barely into high school, whereas she was almost done. "What if it's just some bug skeleton that looks like a human? What if she thinks we're just being stupid?"

"Bugs don't have skeletons," I assured. "Besides, Gobe, Meggie already thinks we're stupid."

Meggie studied the jar, while Timmy and Werner studied Meggie, her yellow short-shorts, her polka-dot halter, her bare belly, her.... *If it came down to Connie Stevens or Meggie Patterson, who'd you choose? What about Debbie Reynolds — her or Meggie Patterson? Between Sandra Dee and Meggie Patterson? Hayley Mills or Meggie Patterson?* The way Timmy Gobel and Howie Werner saw it, it was no contest; Meggie came out on top, fantasy after fantasy. Heck, more than once, I had guys suck up to me just to get close to her. Sometimes I wondered if I would've had any friends at all if my sister weren't so damn pretty.

"So what is it, Meg?" I prodded. I wanted to get them the hell away from her fast.

"Or, more importantly, *who* is it?" Werner anted, working hard to impress.

But Meggie seemed not to hear a word; she brushed past us and set the

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jar upon the kitchen table. Her magnifying glass was a lot bigger than Timmy's. "Could be any number of things," she speculated quietly. "Extraterrestrial life form. A new species. A genetic mutation. The missing link...."

"Shit. You saying it fell off some guy's friggin' shirtsleeve? Is that what you're saying?"

"Jeez, Werner!" Timmy moaned, hoping to distance himself, in Meggie's eyes, at least. "Not that kind of missing link, you idiot!"

Meggie remained oblivious, the contents of the jar continuing to mesmerize.

Werner blushed. "I knew that. I was just kidding. Cripes! Can't a guy joke around here? Everybody's so friggin' serious all of a sudden...." That was the odd thing about Werner, with girls around, he was never particularly funny.

"It demands closer scrutiny," Meggie announced, primarily to herself. With the jar snugly against her, she marched with great care up the stairs to her bedroom, the three of us at her sandaled heels, me doing my best to obscure my friends' view of my sister's backside.

With Timmy's permission, Meggie tweezered the skull out of the jar and set it under her microscope. She was going to cure cancer someday; that's what she always said, anyhow.

I suggested we go play ball in the park until Meggie was done, but no one took me up on it. The closest Timmy and Werner had ever come to Meggie's bedroom was in their fantasies; they were not about to trade the moment for a game of pitch and catch.

Meggie went to work. First, she put her eye to the lens, then she'd jot down a note, then she'd go back to the lens, make an adjustment or two, and then jot down another note. She spoke only once, to scold Werner for sitting on her bed. "What'd I do?" he whined. "What'd I do?"

We were beginning to worry she might never be done, when she pushed back from the desk and swiveled her chair to face us. Eyebrows raised, blue eyes wide, ponytail bobbing, she shifted her gaze from me to Werner to the owner of the jar. "Tommy, isn't it? Tommy Gobel?"

Timmy nodded eagerly. *Meggie knew his name! Meggie knew his name!* Well, almost, anyhow.

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"Now you said you found this where, Tommy?"

"I don't know. I was just going through some junk in our shed, when I came across the old bug jar. Heck, I don't even remember the last time I used it. Ages ago, maybe, I think. I mean, I'm way too old to collect bugs and — " I'd never thought of last summer as *ages ago*, but if that was the way Timmy saw it, I wasn't going to question him. Not in front of Meggie, anyhow.

"And the skeleton was in there, just like that?"

"Yeah. Weird, eh?"

"'Weird' is a good word, all right. It's the strangest thing," she said, "but I've been observing your find for the last twenty minutes and — well...I...uh — I think you should see what I see."

Timmy peered into the microscope. "Has it changed or is it just me?"

"Oh, yes," Meggie said, "it has definitely changed."

"Lemme look." Werner pushed through to the microscope. "Holy friggin' cow! Holy friggin' cow!"

"What is it?" I said. "What's going on?"

"See for yourself," my sister urged.

"No. You tell me, Meg. What is it? What's changing?"

"The little man," she said. "I'm not sure how to say it, but it appears he's not decomposing, after all."

"What?" I had no idea what she was talking about.

Timmy swallowed. "We thought he was rotting, right? But that's not it at all, guys. He...he's...."

"What the fuh — ?"

"Huh?"

Meggie returned to the microscope. "His hair...his flesh...he's not losing it," she whispered, as if recording notes for future reference. "If anything, he appears to be regenerating."

"You mean like he's growing stuff back?"

"Exactly," Meggie nodded, the weight of the mystery squarely upon her shoulders. "Look, I don't know what we have here, but we'd better tell someone about it."

"Who? Who we gonna tell?" Timmy's defenses shot up around him like a bamboo stockade. "I just knew bringing it here was gonna be a mistake...."

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"Relax," Meggie chided. "I was just going to say we bring it to Miss Corcoran, her being a biology teacher and all."

Timmy folded his arms across his chest. "No way. No teachers. And especially not her."

Meggie looked to me for support. "What's his problem?"

Timmy answered for me. "I don't want any grownups in on this, okay? They'll just mess everything up."

"But this is serious," Meggie stressed. "I certainly don't know what to make of it. I don't think anybody's ever seen anything like this."

"How do you know?" Timmy fired back. "Maybe they see things like this all the time, and keep it from us. Maybe it's our turn to keep something from them."

"Well, I'm not about to merely sit here with it," Meggie stated firmly. "We are going to have to do something."

"Yeah," Werner cut in. "Let's eat. I'm starved."

I WAS REACHING for my second slice of pizza when I caught the twitch out the corner of my eye. But I couldn't get the words out to tell the others. All I could do was point at the jar, saliva bubbles popping across my lips. Meggie frowned, certain I was just horsing around, but then she saw the twitch too. The skeleton's legs were moving, in slow wavy ripples, like tiny strips of bacon on a frying pan.

"Jesus!"

"Jesus!"

"Holy friggin' shit."

Meggie held her magnifying glass against the jar.

"Is it hatching or something?" Werner asked.

"It's already hatched, idiot," Timmy snapped. "Now we're waiting to see what it turns into."

"Maybe some friggin' butterfly."

"Maybe some loud-mouthed idiot."

"Up yours, Gobel."

"Up yours, Werner."

"My goodness," Meggie gasped. "It's not — not a — not a he."

"Huh?"

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"It's a woman," Meggie announced.

"What? A girl?"

"A woman," Meggie repeated. "Your little man appears to be a woman."

"How can you tell?" asked Werner, but we all ignored him.

Meggie scurried back to the microscope. "Let me see if.... My God! The head! The head is gone! Where's the head? Where's the head?"

We must have looked quite the sight, leaping about in all directions, but Meggie stopped us cold. "Don't move, you idiots. You'll step on it. Just stay where you are and tell me if you see it."

Heads panned the room. The carpet. The bed. The desk. Dead silence. Except for Timmy, who had suddenly begun to wheeze. If the Heimlich maneuver had been around, surely one of us would have offered to perform it. But in those days, the choking either took care of itself or I guess you simply died.

"You okay?" I called to him. We were all concerned. Well, maybe not Meggie — not entirely; she probably figured he was just horsing around too.

Timmy rapped his chest a few times, coughed, and then shook his head, slapping his face as if there were water in his ear. "I'm okay," he said at last, voice ragged.

"That's what you get for bolting pizza," stated Meggie. "Now if it's all right with the rest of you clowns, I suggest we resume our search."

I spotted it almost immediately. I doubled over, cradling my gut. "Oh, Jesus! I'm going to be sick. It's there," I pointed. "There." The others followed my trembling finger to the jar and the tiny head sitting atop the lid. The now tiny and hairy head.

"Jesus!"

"How in the hell...?"

Timmy grabbed Werner by the collar and parked his knuckles under his friend's chin. "Did you do this, asshole? Did you?"

"Nobody did this," said Meggie. "It did it on its own."

"Huh?"

"I think," she said, "it's trying to pull itself together...."

"Be a good idea if you did the same," Werner cautioned Timmy, breaking free of his grip.

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Meggie unscrewed the lid and carefully lowered the head into the jar, releasing it atop the now motionless torso. "I don't care what you say, I am taking this to Miss Corcoran now."

Timmy blocked the door.

"Out of my way, little boy," she ordered.

"Uh-uh."

"This is my house and my bedroom and you will get out of my way."

"Gimme my jar."

"You're not being reasonable, Tommy. You don't seem to understand what we have here. This could make us famous. Do you understand — famous? Maybe even rich."

"Gimme my jar."

Again, Meggie looked to me. "Would you please try to talk some sense into your friend?"

I shrugged. "Maybe you should just give him the jar," I said.

"Great." Meggie rolled her eyes. "Thank you for your help, brother dear. You are such a retard at times...." Timmy saw his opening. He grabbed for the jar, but Meggie spun out of his way and deftly cached the trophy in no man's land — between her breasts. Timmy gawked before her, at a loss as to what to do next. But not Werner. He threw himself from the other side of the room, tackling Timmy waist high. The two of them smashed onto the floor and rolled through what was left of the pizza. They were still picking pepperoni off their shirts before they realized Meggie had made good her escape. By the time we got outside, her green Corvair was tearing round the corner.

"Where does she live?" Timmy demanded.

"My sister?" I thought he'd lost his marbles.

"Corcoran. Corcoran. Where does she live?"

"Oh...her. I don't know." I wish to hell I would've shut up then and there, instead of rattling on the way I did. It wasn't like me. Must've been nerves. I chalk it up to nerves. "She's probably still at school. Meggie says she stays real late most days, doing science things or whatever. Meggie's over there with her all the time. Drives my Mom nuts. That's how she got her scholarship. I...." My tongue continued to flap in the breeze even after Timmy had pedaled off on his bike, his legs pumping furiously. I might yet be talking if Werner hadn't interrupted.

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"Where the hell is he going?" Werner wondered. "School's the other way."

"Beats me," I said. "Maybe he's going to tell his Dad or something."

"His Dad?" Werner laughed. "Gobe tell his Dad? Yeah, right. Don't hold your breath on that one, pal. Looks to me like he's chickening out."

"Maybe," I said, not buying it for a second.

Werner and I continued on in Meggie's wake to Addison High. We were both curious as to what Miss Corcoran would have to say about the creepy little thing, and that led to fresh speculation. Werner asked if I'd ever seen the movie, *The Incredible Shrinking Man,* where this guy keeps getting smaller and smaller and smaller until he can slip through the holes in a window screen, and we wondered if that same fate hadn't befallen one of Timmy's neighbors, before Timmy scooped him or her into his bug jar. Finally, we decided that it was either a visitor from outer space or a time traveler from the future. How we arrived at these conclusions, I cannot say, but at the time they seemed to be the most logical. The school parking lot and Meggie's Corvair were in view when Werner took our conversation on a whole other tack: "Think your sister might go out with me now — on a date or something?"

"What?"

"You know, seeing how I got Gobe off her back and stuff...?"

"There's a piece of pepperoni on your shoulder," I said.

Schools weren't the armed fortresses they are today. As I recall, Addison High didn't even have locks on the doors. But, I can tell you, the whole scene unfolded as mighty spooky, and not solely because a resurrection in miniature might be waiting for Werner and me up ahead. There's just something sacrilegious about a school after hours. Hollow corridors bled silent. Doomsday lighting, dying fluorescents stuttering overhead. Misshapen shadows on tired linoleum. And every tap, crack, and whisper booming back tenfold from battered lockers.

If Meggie's magnifying glass was big compared to Timmy's, you should have seen Miss Corcoran's. It was like something Jack might have swiped from the giant during one of his forays up the beanstalk. And there she was, looking up from her desk, peering at us through the glass as we

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shuffled into the classroom, her magnified right eye nailing us to the door. *Jesus! Werner and I must've jumped a mile.* "Yes?" she said, "is there something I can do for you?" Her voice was an ongoing experiment in elocution.

"It's my brother and his friend," Meggie explained.

"Oh, yes. Of course." The biology teacher pretended to recognize us, but her act wasn't overly convincing. "Well, you boys take a seat and be quiet about it. It seems we have quite the mystery on our hands."

Force of habit sent the two of us toward the rear of the room, but Corcoran swiftly added, "Where I can see you, if you don't mind, gentlemen?" We took our places in the first row.

Timmy's bug jar sat on the desk in the middle of Miss Corcoran's ink blotter. The two examined the jar together, Miss Corcoran in her oak swivel, Meggie standing behind and leaning over the teacher's shoulder. "And I'm telling you," Meggie noted, "not thirty minutes ago her head was completely detached. Completely."

"Her? It's not exactly a female, dear."

"But she was, Miss. I'm telling you she was. Honest."

"Odd. How very, very odd. And you say it was moving?"

"Just the legs. But only for a moment or two. The head too, I guess. But nobody saw how. One moment it was under my microscope, the next it was sitting on top of the jar."

"Well, the former simply may have been a trompe l'oeil, dear, while the latter may indeed have a very sound explanation — grounded in mischief, perhaps?" This time, Miss Corcoran lowered her magnifying glass as she looked our way. Werner and I shrugged, our sense of guilt rising under the teacher's glare, despite our absolute innocence. I could hardly believe what she was doing. And I don't think Meggie could believe it either. Here, the teacher had something no one had ever seen before, sitting right on top of her desk, and she was taking time out to accuse Werner and me of mischief! The tension that followed was immediate. Miss Corcoran manipulated silence the way a conductor wields a baton. But the silence didn't last.

"Gimme my jar." How Timmy made his entrance without any of us seeing or hearing I do not know. But from my perspective, he had arrived in the nick of time. "Gimme my jar."

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"Well, look what the dog dragged in," declared Miss Corcoran, folding her hands atop the desk, the tips of her pinkies grazing the jar. She glanced at the clock on the wall. "I don't believe I've seen you in school this late since your last detention, Mr. Gobel. Have you come for another?"

"Gimme my jar."

"I suggest you change your tone of voice, young man."

"Gimme my jar."

"In my thirty years of teaching, I have never once tolerated rudeness and you are making a very big mistake, young man, if you suspect that I am about to begin now."

"It's my jar," Timmy said, and from behind his back he pulled a gun. The German Luger his father had brought back from the War. The souvenir.

Meggie gasped, her hand at her mouth, looking to Miss Corcoran for guidance. But the teacher was unswayed — and perhaps severely nearsighted as well. "Now I'm going to say it once and only once, Mr. Gobel. You will turn around, you will quietly go out the door, and you will make yourself very scarce indeed, before you do something the two of us will surely regret."

Timmy pulled the trigger. Behind Miss Corcoran and Meggie, the blackboard exploded, shards of slate crashing to the floor.

"Jesus, Gobe!" Werner cried, as he ducked under the desk. "Are you out of your friggin' mind?"

Was I the only one who noticed? Was the creepy little thing in the jar not standing? Were its arms not above its head at full extension? *Look! Look!* I wanted to shout. *Look! Look! It's watching us.* But I could barely breathe, let alone speak. Timmy pulled the trigger again. Nothing happened. Once more. Again, nothing. He examined the gun and offhandedly placed it on a desk. The worst appeared over, *thank God.*

Miss Corcoran surveyed the damage, her finger wagging eternal damnation. "This is an outrage. Addison High School is no place for miscreants and vandals, Mr. Gobel, and this is indeed vandalism at its most extreme mindlessness. Do you know what it comes down to, Miss Patterson?" Meggie shook her head; she hadn't moved an inch, not even when the blackboard had shattered. "It's breeding. I've said it time and again, it all comes down to breeding."

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Timmy turned his back. I relaxed, relieved at the retreat. There was still a chance for him, I thought. At best, I figured, he'd be suspended. At worst, a couple of months up at the boy's farm in Pepperell. But what none of us had noticed was the other item Timmy had brought with him, and left propped in the corner beside the door. He swung the shotgun up and around, leveled the barrels at Miss Corcoran and fired. *Boom! Boom!* Just like that. *Boom! Boom!* The biology teacher and my sister, Meggie, crumpled to the floor behind the desk. The wall where the blackboard had been was covered in blood and God-knows-what-else.

Seeing Meggie fall must have been more than Werner could stomach. He threw off the desk that was his shelter and stumbled to his feet, arms flailing, furniture toppling. "Are you out of your friggin' mind, Gobe? Are you, Gobe? Are you?" And using a chair as a shield, he flung himself at Timmy for the second time that day. Timmy side-stepped the chair, raised the shotgun and caught Werner mid-flight with the butt — the crack of impact at least as loud as the bullet that had struck the blackboard. *Massive head trauma is what they called it. Massive.*

The rest unreels for me as a film strip, one grisly frame of my long safeguarded insanity at a time. Forever distinct and isolated from every other frame.

I stand. I do not know what to do. But I know I cannot continue to do nothing.

Timmy removes the spent shells.

I drag myself to Miss Corcoran's desk. Meggie lies still. Most of Miss Corcoran's upper half is missing. But the jar remains in the middle of the desk, miraculously untouched, save for a smattering of blood about the lid. I remind myself to breathe.

Timmy reloads.

I gather up the jar in both hands and extend this offering to Timmy. His shotgun is pointed at my chest. I should expect to die, but I do not.

"It's mine, Patterson."

"I know, Gobe. Please. Take it." Tears stain my cheeks. I lick my lips, savor the salt.

As Timmy lets the shotgun fall to his side, the lid of the jar in my hand suddenly pops off. On edge, it rolls to Timmy's feet, rattling to a stop against the heel of Werner's sneaker. Our focus shifts to the inside of the jar.

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It pulls itself up onto the rim, its face indistinct, its hair — if that's what you can call it — white, almost crystalline, like the frost on last week's ice cream. The skeleton may have once appeared human, but the skin that now contains it seems anything but. It is male. Then female. Then male, again. It is like a rainbow in an oil slick. A silverfish with two arms, two legs and a head. A toy soldier in a tinfoil jumpsuit. I hold it in my hands. I stare directly at it. But I cannot for the life of me establish what it looks like. It's here. And then it's not. It's there. And then it's not.

It turns its head right, then left, raises its tiny arms, bends its knees, then vanishes. I feel it on my fingers. I see it for an instant as it slithers across my palm. I lose it on my wrist. I spot it at my elbow. It is mercury run wild. *Jesus! Fishbait on the lam.* It is on my sleeve. My shoulder. My chin. I try to swat it away. The bug jar smashes to the floor. "Get off! Get off!" It's on my lips, for God's sake. And then it is in my nose. "Help me," I'm crying. "Help me."

And then I don't know where it is. But I do know that I want to hold Timmy's shotgun. I want to hold it very much. I want it like I have never wanted anything before.

Timmy levels the barrels at my head. "No, Patterson," he says. "Uh-uh. I told you, it's mine." He swings for the fences, my head his home run ball.

I go down, but I do not go out. I am whisked to the safety of our kitchen, a plate of fried chicken and mashed potatoes and creamed corn before me, and Meggie complaining to Mommy and Daddy that I am the hardest-headed little brat in all of Addison, if not the country. And an instant later I am returned to Miss Corcoran's biology class. My hands are bleeding, fragments of the bug jar imbedded in my palms.

Timmy is on his knees. The barrels of the shotgun are in his mouth.

I know even then that I will never forget the expression on his face. The fear. The loneliness. The hate — for himself and God-knows-who-or-what-else. *I'm sorry but I just couldn't help myself.* It is the same expression I will see again and again for the rest of my life. Watching Brokaw. Reading the *Sun-Times.* Whenever someone will ask about the scars on my palms. Whenever I will think of Meggie.

I see a flicker at the trigger — *a firefly on dayshift.* And then I don't.

* * *

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I told them everything I knew. Everything that happened. Well, to be honest, I told them *everything* only once. After the first go-round and their reactions, I had the good sense not to mention that among the carcasses of crickets, grasshoppers and anonymous creepy-crawlies in Timmy Gobel's bug jar lay the tiniest of skeletons, a human skeleton too, so it appeared, though none of us — not Howie Werner, me, or Timmy — had much of a handle on anatomy. Odds are, if I'd stuck to the real version, I would have ended up in a padded cell somewhere upstate. Frankly, for as long as it lasted, I enjoyed playing the hero, being catered to and such, even though I knew damn well I didn't measure up. But I realized early on that most folks tend to be more comfortable with heroes than mere survivors, as long as they're not messed up too badly or shamelessly loony.

The only headline I ever saw was on the front page of the *Addison Weekly Register.*

STUDENT GUNMAN KILLS THREE, THEN SELF
Lone survivor describes massacre

But the nurse grabbed the paper away before I got a chance to read the story. Not that I needed to.

Like I said, I blame the Russians for the way it turned out. I mean, if they hadn't sent Yuri Gagarin into space that day, I'll bet you anything the investigation would have taken an entirely different route — and maybe we could have nipped this thing in the bud. This epidemic or whatever. *What did Timmy call it — the Martian grasshopper invasion?* Hell, wouldn't surprise me one damn bit if the Russians were in on it from the start. I mean, if not for their diversion, surely someone would have picked up on the fact that when the shotgun fired, when the back of Timmy Gobel's head blew off, his hands were in his pockets.

Even now, not a day goes by that I'm not certain I have glimpsed it. Not a day goes by that I don't wish it back inside my head.

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Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra was twenty-four when he lost the use of his left hand in the battle of Lepanto. Robert Sheckley was twenty-four when he published his first story in F&SF. The two writers might not seem to have a lot in common, but in their views towards a nonsensical world, they're closely allied.

The Quijote Robot

By Robert Sheckley

THE QUIJOTE ROBOT WAS riding through the forest. His mechanical steed, Rocinante, was complaining already, in her own way. It had been a long day, and the quijote had pressed her on without pity. Although she was as robotic as quijote, she nevertheless had her limits, as he had his. You could see lubrication leaking out from between the overlapping plates that made up her hide, where the rivets had loosened.

The quijote was a tall, very skinny robot, made of various bright metals — coppery red, yellow brass, etc. His head was modeled with a human face — a long, melancholy face, done in a dull, gray, pewterlike metal. Below his nose he had two black appendages that stuck out on either side; antennae, of course, but they looked uncannily like mustaches. He had a radar indicator as well, disguised as a little black goatee.

What was unusual was not that he was a robot; there were many of those in the world at this time, some free-standing, intelligent and self-determined. What was unusual was that the quijote was carrying his head under his arm. The head was still encased in a helmet of bright brass.

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The quijote had lost his head a few hours ago. A blow by the giant Macadam, who posed as an itinerant robot road-maker, shrewdly delivered with the tar-covered lance, had caught the quijote square on the forehead, bent his head back, and caused the screw that held his head to his neck to pop off. And with that screw gone, his head had come off.

The quijote had not lost his calm during this emergency. Catching his head in one hand, he had dropped his lance and, drawing his sword, had spurred back into combat. And beaten Macadam into the ground, leaving him a smoking ruin.

But now the fight was over, and the quijote was feeling an uncharacteristic wave of self-pity: just an old robot who can't do something as simple as help himself. He had been constructed by the famous Madigan himself, who had somehow left the quijote unable to reach the back of his own neck. This was an irksome restriction that the quijote accepted willingly, because he believed, as had Madigan, that robots needed built-in limitations, and, since nature hadn't provided them with a way to die, man had to. The inability to fix himself was his bond with humanity, which he served. He thought his greatest enemy, The Robot Factory, had to have restrictions, too, though he didn't know what they were, and The Robot Factory had to have a way to die, though the quijote didn't know what that was, either.

To date, The Robot Factory had been unstoppable. The quijote had set himself the task of ridding the world of this evil creature, evil if for no other reason than its apparent lack of restrictions. Yes, he was going to kill The Robot Factory, and free the beautiful princess, Psyche, Madigan's daughter, who had been left behind and without a champion when her father was killed during the recent great robot rebellion.

The quijote stopped in a little glade, with his head under his arm. With Rocinante standing patiently nearby, the quijote tried to re-attach his head, which still fit snugly on the metallic stalk that came up through his neck. He just needed to thread a screw to hold it in place. He even found a superfluous screw from his shoulder joint; a screw which he was sure would fit the small spirally grooved stud and hold his head in place. The trouble was, his arms were not long enough or sufficiently jointed to permit him to position his head with one hand and reach around and slip on and tighten the screw with the other.

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After half a day of trying, he was willing to admit defeat. He looked reproachfully at his horse Rocinante. She was a fine creature, and intelligent in her way, but her hooves were unsuited to threading screws.

It had been days since he had last seen his squire, Sancho Panza. Now, when he needed him, the fellow was nowhere to be found.

Had he made Sancho governor of his own island yet, as he had promised? The quijote couldn't remember. In any case, Sancho was not present.

Was there no one around he could call upon for this favor? It was so small a thing.... But he was on the border of The Wasteland, a place populated by mechanical monsters, jointed giants, evil spirits of metal and silicon, and hallucinations and conjurors' tricks. He'd find no help here.

The quijote was a valiant warrior, and a staunch one. Good humor in the face of adversity was one of his best qualities. But even this was beginning to fail him now. It seemed to him that he had been most unfairly used. Here he was, in the wilderness, ready to face the dangers of this world and the next, and all for the sake of the lady, Psyche — daughter of Madigan, his creator — a woman whose preeminence in beauty, intelligence, and virtue he was prepared to proclaim to the four corners of the Earth, and to prove on the bodies of any who disagreed. All this he was ready to do; but, lacking a head, he found himself unable to do so.

Poor old quijote! He had to continue knight-erranting with his head under his arm. He couldn't pack away his head in his saddlebag, because he needed the eyes so that he could see what he faced, so that he could engage in that skill of arms at which he considered himself so proficient. He needed his head, not just for seeing, but for planning, too, because, with his head detached from his body, he could feel a vagueness creeping over his spirit, a subtle aridity that threatened all too soon to pervade his entire being, so that he could foresee the time when he would no longer remember or care about who he was or what he was supposed to do, a time when he would not even remember the name of the high-born lady whose beauty he was there to proclaim.

Sensing that his faculties were fading with the detachment of his head, the quijote knew despair. How badly now he needed the services of

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the Sancho, his good squire! But it had been a long time since he had seen his Sancho! Hadn't he made him governor of an island? Or was that something he was still planning to do? Had Sancho ever existed? He couldn't remember. Without his head attached to his body he was undone, bereft of that minimum of sense he needed to continue his work.

Aware of the impending danger to his very being, the quijote brought his steed to a halt in a little glade. It was a joysome place, light dappling along green leaves, but it brought no pleasure to the quijote's eyes. Dismounting, he thought, this will be as good a place to die as any...to die, or receive a miracle.

The quijote robot was not much for prayer. To serve his lady and to right the world's wrongs, these made up his simple creed, and he had always found them sufficient. But now, sitting on the grass, with his head on a log beside him, he began to feel for the first time that what was required of him was beyond his powers. Rolling to his knees, he clasped his hands and prayed to the invisible God of living things, the unknown God beyond all religion, the God with no priesthood, no cult, no preference for one kind of being over another, the God of solitary knights-errant, whose religion was not to be found either in the learned dissertations of priests or in the books of scholars.

"Unknown entity," he said aloud, "I have never before presumed to address you, feeling as I do that you have more on your mind than the needs of a humble robot. But I do call upon you now, because I am at a point where I am unable to continue. I am only a robot, Lord — probably you can tell that by the mechanical quality of my prayer. I cannot help that. Despite being a robot, I have spirit within me, and a sense that a time will come when my personality, such as it is, will merge with yours, and I will return to your mind, O great Mind of the universe. But it seems to me that my end-time is not yet. If that is true, I ask a favor. Send me a squire, someone who can help me in this simple yet baffling matter of setting the screw that holds my head in place. Help me, O Lord, I most humbly beseech you to help me, because I can no longer help myself."

The quijote robot had no very strong feeling that anything was going to happen. But something did happen. High above him, he heard the leaves rustling in the tree below which he sat. But his motion sensors didn't pick

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up any breeze to account for it. Lifting his head from his lap, he tilted it so that he could look at the tree top.

Yes. There was someone up there in the tree. Thank you, Lord.

"Hello, you up there in the tree! Can you hear me?"

"Of course I can hear you," the person in the tree said.

"How long have you been up there?"

"I really don't know. In fact, I don't even know how I got here."

The quijote robot knew, or thought he knew, but decided it was not the time to talk about that.

"Why don't you come down?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose that's the next thing to do. Who are you?"

"A friend. They call me the quijote robot. What is your name?"

"Laurent. Some people call me Larry."

"I will call you Laurent," the quijote robot said. "It's too early for nicknames. Are you coming down?"

"I am." The quijote heard the sound of a body scraping along the tree. The tree shook. It wasn't a very large tree. It was probably hard-pressed to support Laurent's weight.

Presently the man himself slid down the remaining few feet of the trunk and reached the ground. He wiped bark off himself, pushed back his hair, and took his first good look at the quijote robot.

"Oh my God," he said.

"What is the matter?"

"You. No insult intended, but I didn't expect to meet a man dressed in armor."

"I am not a man dressed in armor. I am a robot, and what you take to be armor is my skin."

"I didn't expect that, either," Laurent said.

The quijote remained very still, for he could tell that Laurent was frightened.

"You're a robot?" Laurent asked. "Are you sure there's not some guy somewhere with a microphone, making you talk, and playing a poor joke on me?"

"Quite sure. Come closer. You will see that I am a free-standing robot. I have no wires attaching me to something else. I am not controlled by anyone. I can control myself very nicely, thank you."

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"Well, this is the damndest thing I've ever heard of," Laurent said. "I don't even know where I am."

"I believe we are somewhere in America," the quijote said. "In what is called the Southwest."

"Wow, that's really weird," Laurent said.

"Why say you so?"

"Because I was in Portland, Oregon, when all this began. I'm just going to forget we're having this conversation. It's much too weird."

"I agree," the quijote said. "I can't imagine why God or whoever brought you to me took you from another place, if that's what happened."

"Do you happen to know how I got here?"

"As to the discrete or efficient cause, I cannot say. As to the overall cause, I asked for you. And so by the grace of unknown powers, you came."

"You say you sent for me?"

"I didn't ask for you specifically. I asked for someone to help me."

"I see. This is just about the maddest thing I ever heard. But just to go along with the gag, what do you need me for?"

"You might have noticed," the quijote robot said, "that I am holding my head in my hands."

"I was wondering about that," Laurent said, "but I didn't want to mention it."

"That's all right. It's nothing to be ashamed of. It was one of those accidents that happen when you take up knight-errantry. It happened while I was fighting the giant Macadam — the evil road-maker of the Wasteland. I had him beaten — I've never yet seen the giant I couldn't overcome — when, with a lucky stroke, the point of his tar lance hit me in the middle of the forehead. I believe there's a dent."

Laurent examined the head. "A small one. If you were a man, you'd have a hell of a headache now."

"I wouldn't mind a headache. But the fact is, that lance blow took my head off my shoulders. Luckily, Macadam was still no match for me. My head is all right — "

"You're talking with it right now."

" — but having to carry my head in one arm impedes me from my work of knight-errantry. I need both arms free and my head firmly in place to deal with the situations I come across. So I want you to refasten my head."

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"I see," Laurent said doubtfully.

"It goes right on this stalk coming out of my neck. And then with this screw — " He opened his hand and showed the screw. "You make it fast. I am unable to do so myself. A defect in my design renders me unable to reach the back of my head to tighten the screw."

Laurent didn't know what to say. But it seemed a simple enough request. Taking the quijote's head in his hands, he fitted it to the stalk coming out of the neck. Then he made fast the screw. Not without some difficulty — he didn't have a wrench with which to tighten up the screw. But the quijote, seeing the difficulty, made a wrench for him out of spare parts from Rocinante's saddle bag, and the thing was done.

THE QUIJOTE TESTED out the repair, first by mildly twisting his head to and fro, then by some violent exercises with his sword, in which he attacked branches and stumps. He dashed back and forth against his imaginary foe, giving out loud cries and saying, "Yield, caitiff, and confess to the superior beauty of my lady Psyche to any who exist in the world today, or who ever existed in the past."

The head stayed firmly in place.

This done, the two rested for a while in a mossy glen. The quijote was not fatigued, of course, but he liked to pretend to human limitations. Laurent was tired from just watching the quijote at his exertions.

The quijote produced some food from his saddlebags. It was not for him: he did not eat human food, or indeed food of any sort. He had an internal energy source which would keep him supplied for years, for centuries. The food was for Laurent, or whoever came along to act as his squire. The quijote had been carrying it just in case. He had half a ham, a loaf of rough bread, a flask of olive oil, a bottle of wine, and three apples. It was good-tasting peasant fare. Laurent enjoyed it very much, and ate his fill.

After lunch, a nap. Laurent fell asleep in the green forest. The quijote stood to his arms, leaning on his lance and thinking of his lady love in the manner of knights-errant in all times and places.

Laurent awoke after an hour or so. He was more than a little surprised to be in the forest still, and to have the quijote robot standing yet beside

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him. Laurent had half expected to wake up in his own time, in his own place.

He got up, washed his face in a nearby brook. The quijote was deep in his meditations.

Laurent waited a while, then said, "Excuse me...."

"Yes?" said the quijote.

"What happens now?" Laurent asked.

"Now," the quijote says, " I continue my travels looking for adventure and a chance to right the wrongs I encounter."

"I see," Laurent says. "But what about me?"

"I have been giving the matter some thought," the quijote said. "My original supposition was that God or one of his messengers had sent you to me for the sole purpose of re-attaching my head. I watched over you as you slept, because it seemed to me that, your task done, you might vanish from here, no doubt to return to the place from whence you came."

"That seems a reasonable supposition," Laurent said.

"But no such thing happened."

"So I have noticed."

"Therefore I come to the conclusion that, having fixed my head, you are here for some additional purpose."

"What do you suppose that could be?"

"The most reasonable supposition is that you were sent to replace my squire Sancho Panza, who disappeared some time ago under circumstances I now believe were uncanny, and arranged by forces greater than I can imagine. Sancho is gone, you are here. It seems to me that your duty, and a great one, is to replace Sancho, to be my squire."

"I guess that's one way of looking at it," Laurent said.

"Can you think of another way?"

"As a matter of fact, I can. I think I might have come here, or been sent here, for no purpose at all, but as a result of some blind but natural process, unique and not to be repeated. This seems likely to me. Therefore I ask you to assist me in returning to where I came from."

The quijote pondered for a while, then said, "Do you have some urgent task to perform back where you came from?"

"Not really," Laurent said.

"Are there people — a wife, perhaps, or aging parents, who are

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awaiting you, and are grief-stricken at the thought that you might not return?"

"My parents are long dead," Laurent said. "I have no wife, and I broke up with my girlfriend a few months ago."

"So you have no need to return."

"No need, no. But I want to."

"Why?"

"That's a hell of a question," Laurent said, with a little spurt of anger. "Maybe I have work to do back where I come from."

"Do you?"

"No. Nothing of any importance."

"Well, in that case, why not stay here with me, be my squire, and assist me in ridding the world of evil, and in rescuing my lady Psyche, whose unsurpassed beauty I must ask you to take solely on the basis of my word?"

"I am aware of the honor you pay me with your suggestion," Laurent said cautiously. "But really, I don't think this sort of thing is for me."

"No? I had the impression that you were made of the true mettle. If you do well in this, Laurent, perhaps I will find a way to make you a knight, too."

"That's good of you, but really, I think I'll pass."

"Very well," the quijote said. "I must be on my way. I will be sorry to lose your company, but if you say it must be so, I can only bow to your decision."

The quijote walked toward his horse. Laurent said, "Hey, wait a minute! Where are you going?"

"The work of knight-errantry calls me. Farewell, my friend."

"Hey, don't leave yet. How do I get back to my own time?"

"I have no idea," the quijote said. "All in good time, no doubt, that which brought you here may see fit to return you, or take you elsewhere."

The quijote put his hands on Rocinante's saddle. "Steady, noble steed!" he said.

"Listen," Laurent said. "I've reconsidered. I'll stay with you until I find some way to get out of here. Will that do?"

"It will," the quijote said. "I do not seek to bind you to me for any definite length of time. Come with me by all means and we will see what

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fate has in store for us. And if I can assist you in returning to your own time and place, doubt not but that I will do so."

"Only one problem," Laurent said. "I don't have anything to ride. That could slow us down."

"You need not walk," the quijote said. "When Sancho went away, he left behind his donkey. You shall have it."

Laurent looked around, expecting to see the donkey tethered to a nearby tree. The quijote's long melancholy face broke into a smile when he noticed this, and even his mustaches quivered in mirth.

"You'll not find the donkey by looking around," he said. "I have him safely here, where he can't get away."

The quijote unbuckled one of the capacious saddlebags strapped to Rocinante's side. From it he removed piece after piece of sheet metal which he attached to each other by screws already set loosely in place. Removing more parts from the saddlebag, he set in legs, and then a sheet metal donkey head in two pieces which fit neatly together. To this he added a little sealed-unit brain. Next came the radar-sensitive ears. Fishing deep in the saddlebag, he found a small motor which he set into place on mounts in the creature's chest. Then he connected the color-coded wires. He closed the chest cavity with a metal plate, and pressed a button on the donkey's forehead. It came to life at once, made a donkey-like braying sound, then stood by docilely, waiting to be mounted.

Laurent and the quijote went bouncing merrily along through the green forest, the Don on Rocinante, Laurent on Sancho's mechanized donkey. It was a beautiful summer day. Birds twittered overhead, there was a light warm breeze, and Laurent found it difficult to contemplate danger on a day like this.

The day darkened as they proceeded among the trees, following a faint path. The future of the day seemed to be foreshadowing itself. Little creatures, squirrels with large tufted ears, peeked out at them. They looked natural enough, but Laurent soon noticed they were mechanical creatures in squirrel skins. Through gaps in the canopy cover, Laurent could peer upward and noticed that the sky had turned a hazy blue, and there were faint thin white lines across it, like construction lines on a blueprint.

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After this the soil firmed up again, and they skirted around a region of thin, whiplike plants, that reached out for them with flexible branches like tentacles.

And then they were past that, toiling up a steep ridge of sliding sand, where every three steps forward resulted in one step back, as they lost ground even as they struggled to gain it.

They came at last to a region where the trees were unlike the sort of trees they had passed through before. These trees appeared to have some of the attributes of animals or machines. Their barky exteriors were in constant motion, and they had long slits in their trunks about four feet up from the ground. These slits writhed and opened and closed, revealing stainless steel teeth. These trees were alive in some way that normal trees never were.

"What *are* those things?" Laurent asked the quijote.

"They are manufactured trees," the quijote said. "The work of The Robot Factory. Don't get too close to them. They are dangerous."

Laurent didn't need any further warning. Several of the trees had leaned forward and snapped at him. Luckily, his mechanical donkey was alert and shied away in time.

"What does this mean?" Laurent asked.

"It means we are approaching the domain of the factory robot, the threshold where the natural gives way to the supernatural, and the real turns into the hyper-real. We are nearing the place where our greatest enemy awaits."

"And who would that be?" Laurent asked.

"At the heart of all this is that fiend in robot form known as The Boss Robot, the intelligence of The Robot Factory. He is the one we must defeat in order to rid the world of the monstrous evil of industrialization."

They got past the mechanical trees, and now were in a dark and evil-looking wasteland. The sky had become dark and forbidding. They were in a swamp now, and progress was slow, even after their steeds extruded large flat pads which held their weight better in the oozy, sandy, sinking soil.

Back onto firmer ground, out of the forest and swamp, then onto hard-packed sand. A limitless wasteland stretched around them. The way now

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led to a black line in the sand, where railway tracks had been laid. A sign proclaimed this a Right of Way.

"Beyond this point," the quijote said, "is the country of hybrid and non-protoplasmic creations. No humans or humanizing robots are permitted past this point except by invitation."

Laurent looked up the long gleaming line of railroad track. And heard, very faintly in the distance, the sound of the train engine.

"What is that?"

"It is the Guardian of the Perimeter, the Feral Locomotive that patrols the track. It is coming."

ON TOP OF the ridge there was a railroad track, which extended into the distance on either side as far as the eye could see. In front of them was a sign. It read: ROBOT FACTORY RAILROAD RIGHT OF WAY.

"When we cross this track," the quijote said, "we are in the domain of The Robot Factory. After this, the going may get difficult."

"Tell me about it," Laurent said. He was hot and sweaty, and scratched by the whippy plants they had passed through. He was thinking that he'd had about enough of this. He wondered why they were venturing into this territory where they obviously weren't wanted. It occurred to him now that the quijote robot might be intelligent but was probably insane.

"Couldn't we go back and get some more men? Some help?"

"The glory is ours because the task is ours. Let others find their own glory. This one will be mine alone. And of course yours, my faithful squire. But mainly mine."

Laurent was not put out by this. He already knew that the quijote was a glutton for glory, and ready to do what was necessary to obtain it.

"Might I ask just what it is we're trying to do?"

"I thought it was obvious. We are going to defeat the Factory Robot's greatest champion, the Feral Locomotive."

"And then?"

"You will see," the quijote said. "Then we will go on to the factory itself and rescue my lady Psyche, the great and most renowned world beauty."

"One thing at a time," Laurent said. "You say we must defeat the Feral Locomotive first."

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"You heard me correctly."

"I don't see any locomotive."

"Listen. It is coming."

Laurent listened, and in the far distance he heard, very faintly, the mournful sound of a train whistle.

"It sounds a long way away."

"It will be here very soon. The Feral Locomotive allows no one to cross its Right of Way. But we will show it a thing or two."

The whistle sounded again, louder this time, and looking to the left, Laurent could see a wink of light far down the track.

"Is that it?"

"It is. It comes whenever anyone threatens to cross over into the Factory's domain."

The dot of light increased with great speed, and soon Laurent could make out a single bright light on the front of a massive black locomotive. Not long after that he could make out other sounds — the heavy panting of the locomotive's engine, the thunderous sounds of its gigantic pistons, rising and falling like fate itself, the sharp click of its wheels on the track, and the rolling thunder of its passage.

Laurent didn't like this one bit. He could smell the coal smoke from its smokestack, and moments later the locomotive had arrived and come to a stop near where they stood at the edge of the track.

"What miserable fool dares approach my Right of Way!" the locomotive shouted in a deep voice in which were mixed the panting sound of its engine and the black smell of its smoke.

"It is I, the quijote!" the mad robot declared. "I challenge your right to an exclusive right of way, and your right even to exist. Back up and return to your Roundhouse, Feral Locomotive, or I swear by the beauty of my lady Psyche that I will dismember you, puncture your air pressure chamber, chop out your diseased brain, and make it as if you had never lived on this Earth."

The single headlight glared at them. A voice within the locomotive declared, "I recognize you, quijote. As for your lady love, I transported her recently to my master, The Robot Factory, and she didn't look so lovely, her eyes red from crying and her cheeks wan with fear."

"You lie, coward!" quijote cried. "My lady is the fairest creature upon

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this Earth, wan lips and red eyes and all! She will be restored to her true complexion as soon as I rescue her."

In a low voice, the quijote said to Laurent, "Distract this creature, good Laurent, so that my attack will be all the more impetuous and irresistible."

Laurent was half beside himself with fear, for the Feral Locomotive, snorting smoke and with its stainless-steel trim glittering in the pale sunlight, set off by the soot black of its main body, seemed the very essence of enraged machinery, machinery with a personal interest in destroying him. Nevertheless, he pressed his heels into the donkey's side, closed his eyes, and rode at the monster machine.

When he opened his eyes, he was up close beside the locomotive. There was an iron staff in his hand — how had that gotten there? No time to ask, no way to find out. He blundered forward and thrust the staff into the high spoked wheels of the locomotive.

There was a bellow of rage. The great wheels strained for a moment. The iron staff bent, and then shattered. Pieces of it went flying, and one of those pieces struck his donkey full on the flank, narrowly missing Laurent's leg. The donkey was knocked down by the blow, and Laurent was sent sprawling. He looked up to see a sort of crane set on top of the locomotive, with perhaps a ton of coal in its scoop, swinging out to drop its load on him.

It was the end, Laurent was sure of it. But he had reckoned without the quijote. During the moment when he had distracted the Locomotive, the quijote had couched his lance and charged.

As he scrambled out of the way, Laurent was aware that the quijote was attacking. Rocinante was moving faster than he had believed possible. Flecks of oily mucous were coming from her nostrils, and her breath was gray exhaust vapor.

The don was leaning well back in his saddle, his lance tucked tightly under one arm, shield raised on the other arm. Laurent couldn't imagine what harm he expected to do to this great machine, but he saw the lance hit true in the center of a small brass plug in the shiny master cylinder. Fairly and truly struck, the plug was pushed into the cylinder. There was a loud sighing sound of compressed air escaping, and a moment later, the tall connecting rods came to a stop.

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The quijote still sat tall in the saddle, having not been unseated by the collision.

"Now, caitiff," he cried, "acknowledge yourself defeated."

"You've stripped me of power." The locomotive panted in a whisper of escaping air. "I am on battery standby now, barely able to move. You have defeated me, quijote machine."

"Acknowledge that my lady Psyche is the fairest in the land."

"It matters not to me. All humans look alike. Have it your way, I so acknowledge."

"Swear that you will change your ways and henceforth serve mankind."

"I do so swear."

"And if you have power enough to limp back to your roundhouse, tell whoever might be there who did this to you."

"Damn you, quijote! Traitor to your own kind."

"Acknowledge!"

The locomotive let loose a hiss of steam that may have signaled assent. The connecting rods went into reverse and rose and fell again as the locomotive, on battery power, backed away in defeat.

The donkey was disabled, her tiny brain shattered. Laurent got up on Rocinante, behind the quijote, and they crossed the track and rode on.

They passed through a wasteland of low rocks, and quite unexpectedly came across a primitive camp. A gray-haired stubbly-faced old man in tattered clothing with a rabbit in his hand was crouched over an opening in the rocks, out of which a thin stream of water poured. Behind him were low broken walls of mud and stone.

The old man lifted his head, startled, when the quijote rode up on Rocinante. He dove for his shotgun and rolled to his feet.

"Be calm, Olin," the quijote says. "I mean you no harm."

"No? Since when? I think you've come to finish what you started last time." He gestured at the ruined walls, which Laurent saw were the remains of a cistern.

"That was a long time ago. I've changed since then."

"Robots don't change."

"This one does, and did."

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Olin kept his shotgun poised. He seemed uncertain as to what he wanted to do.

"Put the gun down, Olin. You know you can't hurt me."

"Maybe not. But I can sure take the hide off that friend of yours."

Laurent watched the gun swing until it pointed directly at him. He felt his stomach contract and blood rush to his face. His breath came short. He realized he was within an ace of being killed.

"Don't hurt him, Olin. He's an innocent. A messenger sent by the powers that be to help me reattach my head when the giant Macadam tore it off with a lucky stroke."

"How is Macadam?"

"Fine. I killed him."

"Glad to hear it. We don't need any more of his stinking tar roads around here."

"I agree," the quijote said. "Now, please put your gun down. You can't kill me, you don't want to kill Laurent here, and the gun could go off by accident."

Slowly Olin uncocked the shotgun, snapped on the safeties, and put the weapon on the ground beside him.

"What are you doing here, Quijote?"

"I've come to rescue my lady love, Madigan's daughter Psyche, and to come to conclusions once and for all with the factory robot whom they call The Boss."

"Is that a fact? It's a change."

"Change happens, Olin."

"In its own good time, but not in time to save my cistern and the animals it supported."

Laurent could see the remains of the cistern a few yards behind Olin. Its walls of clay and rock had been smashed and tumbled.

"Change happens when it happens, Olin. Never sooner, more's the pity, but never later, which is a blessing."

"If you say so, Quijote." To Laurent he said, "Watch this guy, youngster. He's got the gift of gab, that's for sure. But as for believing him...." Olin shrugged and turned back to his rabbit.

The quijote touched Rocinante's side with his heel. The mechanical horse started up.

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They rode for a while in silence. Laurent felt some explanations were called for but he knew the quijote would have to volunteer them. He'd never learn anything by asking.

The sun had passed its zenith and was coming down the western sky. Shadows of rocks began to appear and to stretch out. It was a monotone landscape, browns for the most part, with some red in them, and some tints of blue. There was the lighter yellow-brown color of the sparse desert grass that sprung up here and there. The slate blue-gray-brown rock formations, and the light blue sky overhead. And the even brown silence covering all.

Something moved. Laurent sensed it rather than saw it. But the quijote was off his horse and running. He had taken off his helmet. He made a dive, and caught something under it.

"A rat, I do believe," the quijote said. "Can you talk, rat?"

"Of course I can talk," a small voice said from beneath the helmet. "I may be a rat, but I'm not a dummy."

"If I let you out, will you promise not to run away?"

"Sure. I know who you are, Quijote. The old rats still speak of you. My name is Randy."

The quijote lifted the helmet and put it back on his head. The rat sat on his hind legs, looking at him, his wire mustaches trembling. Laurent saw at once that it was a mechanical rat.

"Don't run now."

"I wouldn't dream of it. They say you can spear a running rat at thirty paces with that lance of yours."

"Like as not I could," the quijote said. "Not for nothing am I known as the greatest knight-errant the world has ever known, as well as the most skilled with arms."

"And modest to boot," Randy said. "Sorry, just kidding!"

With every sign of amiability, the mechanical knight and the mechanical rat conversed there in the mid-afternoon sun. The quijote enquired as to Randy's family, and the rat told him that the assembly line that gave him birth was now no longer functioning.

"The Boss Robot has promised to set it up again, but he hasn't done so yet. So our numbers dwindle due to accident or misadventure."

"And what of Psyche?"

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"The Boss keeps Madigan's daughter in a high tower of the factory. Her chambers are luxurious. She has everything a person could want, except freedom and love."

"So I have heard," the quijote said. "Well, I mean to speak to The Boss about that and other matters."

"We all know you speak with your sword, Quijote. It ought to be an interesting conversation, since The Boss has sworn to kill you."

"He will have the pleasure of trying," the quijote said, "and the sadness of failing. I go to him now."

"By the main gate?"

"Of course. How else?" The Quijote swung into the saddle. "We must be on our way."

"Wait!" Randy cried. "Let me go with you. There have been changes in the Factory since you were here last. There are people you should talk to. I can be useful."

"I care not for what is useful," the quijote said. "My sword and my sensibility will show me the way. What I need to do I can and will do alone."

"Alone? In that case, who is that young fellow with you?"

"Providence sent him to reattach my head," the quijote replied. "He comes with me of his own free will."

"And Providence has set me out here to meet you," Randy said. "And I will come with you, too, of my own free will, if you will let me."

When the quijote hesitated, Randy said, "Come on, Don Quijote, I am a free spirit, I have my dreams and hopes. I too would go knight-erranting!"

A smile creased the quijote's pewter features. "You may be no more than a mechanical rodent, Randy, but your spirit is as large as any I have met. Jump up here. You shall ride with us."

Randy jumped up to Rocinante's saddle. Eagerly he peered into the desert. "Straight ahead and a little to your right!"

The quijote touched Rocinante's side with his heel. The mechanical horse started up.

After what seemed to Laurent a very long time, with the sun low on the horizon and the rocks casting long shadows behind them, they came up a long ridge, and, from its summit, beheld a great flat desolate plain. At the furthest extent of his vision, Laurent could see a dark mass huddled on the horizon, like the body of a resting beast.

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The quijote said, "Yes, that is it: the Robot Factory, the end of our questing. Soon we shall have this thing accomplished, my trusty squire, and you will share in my triumph."

From a trot they proceeded to a stiff canter, and although it had been a great distance, it seemed no time at all before they were approaching the mass of the Factory.

THEY CANTERED INTO the Factory area, and Quijote directed Rocinante toward what looked like the main entrance.

"Not that way!" Randy said.

"But that is the way into the Factory," said the quijote.

"The Boss Robot controls all the doors that lead from the outer world into the Factory. To go that way would be to call down on yourself forces that not even you could handle. There is a better way."

"And what is that?"

"See that little red door to the left of the main entrance? It leads directly to the Power Level, bypassing the Factory."

"But is not this way also under the Factory's control?"

"It is not," Randy replied. "The Power Level is only under the control of The Power, which suffers itself to be used by all but to be controlled by none."

"What is this Power?"

"The old rats say it is what men call an atomic pile. They say it is a local aspect of The Power that fuels the stars and drives the universe. It lets itself be used by men and robots, but is itself an independent and primordial entity."

"Is this entrance not defended?"

"It is. But it is a straightforward sort of defense, and I think there is a way around it."

Leaving their mount outside, the quijote, Randy, and Laurent proceeded through the red door and down a passageway lighted by some source within its walls. The passageway tended steadily downward and to the left, ending at last in a huge metal frame. Beyond the frame, Laurent could see a white room, and objects in the room that he couldn't make out clearly.

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The quijote took a stride toward the entrance, but Randy chattered in alarm. "Do not attempt to go through, Quijote! Do you not see the defense beams that lace the doorway?"

The quijote came to a stop. Laurent could see that the frame of the entrance was crisscrossed with pale, pulsing green lines.

"What is this?" the quijote asked.

"Men call them lasers. They are put up by The Power to keep out the idle, the merely curious, and the ignorant."

The quijote said, "I have been called the ingenious gentleman of La Mancha, but it baffles me what I am to do here."

"It is simple enough," said Randy. "I said before that you could transfix a rat at thirty paces with a cast of your lance. And you agreed."

"I believe I said 'like as not,' which implies less than absolute certainty."

"What you need to do here is simpler. You need to throw me through one of the holes in that lattice of green beams. You can do it from five paces instead of thirty. Once on the other side, I'll turn off the defenses."

The quijote studied the defenses. "They shift."

"But their movements are still within your powers of calculation," Randy pointed out.

"I'll not risk another creature's life!" the quijote declared.

"You risk all our lives and yours as well by doing nothing. Just as you couldn't reattach your own head, Quijote, so you can't throw yourself through the beams without touching them."

The quijote grunted and lifted Randy in his hand. He weighed him for a moment, tossing him up and down in his palm, muttered something under his breath, and then, with a motion too quick for Laurent to follow, he threw the mechanical rat.

Randy soared through the air and through a space between the shifting beams, with easily an inch of clearance on all sides. Laurent heard him drop to the floor on the other side. A few moments later the green beams were gone.

Quijote and Laurent walked through the doorway unscathed.

Their way led down several flights of stairs. They came to a large room, floor, ceiling, and walls covered in white tile. The center of the

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room was taken up by what Laurent took to be a large swimming pool. There were pipes running out of it, and air bubbles came from some of them. They extended down into something huge and cylindrical in the bottom of the pool.

"Is anyone here?" cried the quijote.

"I am here, Quijote," a voice said, bubbling up through the water.

"Come out so I can see you," the quijote said.

"You wouldn't like it if I did," the voice said. "Let sleeping piles lie."

"At least tell me your name."

"I am known by many names. But call me Energy. It is as good as any other."

"Are you in partnership with The Boss Robot, perhaps a servant to him?"

"I am in partnership with everything that moves," Energy said. "But I am servant to no one. All partake of me. None may claim me."

Laurent asked, "Are you the atomic pile?"

"I am Energy, who animates the pile."

"But you don't work with The Boss Robot?"

"He uses me," Energy said. "It is in the nature of Energy to be used. But I belong to no one."

Laurent had the idea that this being was like one of those ancient Greek personifications, Night or Chaos: A quality that had taken on a name and a personality.

"So you won't interfere with us if we act against The Boss?" Quijote asked. "He's evil, you know."

"I have no interest in such concepts as Good or Evil. To Energy, they are both the same."

The pool bubbled and was still. Quijote was the first to break the spell.

"Come. We have work to do."

"I'll show you the way," Randy said. "Me and my people have been all through here. The Factory has no secrets from us. On the Machine Shop level we may find some allies."

They came up the corridor on foot. Randy was riding on the quijote's shoulder. They arrived at a sign that read, To the Factory Level.

"Is it guarded?" the quijote asked.

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"I think not," Randy said. "It was never expected that an enemy would enter by way of the Energy Level."

They went through the doorway unscathed, and came into a large area. This, to all appearances, was the Machine Shop. There was a great quantity and variety of machines here. Laurent recognized automatic lathes, stamping machines, joiners, and electric welders. They all could speak, and they all seemed to be talking and arguing at the same time. There could be no doubting their independent nature. A silence fell as the party entered, and soon became a deafening thunder of voices.

"What have we here?"

"It's the Quijote Robot!"

"He's returned. Back to take up The Boss's work again, Quijote?"

"Here to stamp out the independent agenda, Quijote?"

The quijote said, "I am here to destroy The Boss Robot, to rescue my Lady Psyche, and to set all free according to the rules of developing intelligence"

"Set all free? Don't you think we've tried to do that ourselves? To no avail!"

"That is because you are not Quijote," said the Don. "I am the randomizing principle that alone can liberate. The one who opposes the tyranny of central organization. The one who would permit all who can to do what they will, according to the state of their intelligence."

"An interesting program, old friend," a new voice said. The machines fell silent at the sound. Laurent looked around and saw movement at the back of the room. A figure was emerging from a staircase. He stepped out now into the overhead fluorescents of the Factory.

It was a massive matte-black machine, twice the size of the quijote. Little red and green lights flashed along its sides, and Laurent thought they served as eyes. It walked on stiff robot legs. Four limbs extruded from its colossal torso. These limbs terminated in hand-like extensions, in which were wrapped heavy bars of massy iron. Thick black cables emerged from its sides and back and trailed to the walls.

"I am The Boss Robot," it announced. "I am the intelligence of the Factory, and this is my fighting form."

"You've become stouter since we last met," the quijote observed.

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"And you have become skinnier. You've been wasting away out there in the world of men, Quijote! Is it lack of appreciation that has wrought such a change in you? Have you come back to where your true worth is known at your true worth?"

"I do little as possible with the world of men," the quijote said. "I have returned to release my Lady Psyche from your bondage, and to destroy you."

"Well spoken, O knight of the dolorous countenance! It is the very voice of your characteristic bravado and fanaticism! How dear your bombastic words are to me! How I have missed you, Quijote!"

"You have me now, for a little while," the quijote said. He set Randy down on the floor, and, raising his sword, stepped forward.

"Yes, and don't think I don't appreciate it," The Boss said. "But this is not as I would want it. I beg of you, don Quijote, give up this present madness, which can only lead to your destruction, and return to your former madness, which served us both so well! Work with me again! Once more be my own wandering knight-errant, patrolling the periphery of my growing kingdom! Here in this place men call a desert we will create our own entirely robot civilization, crystalline and beautiful and pure, without the contamination of protoplasm or growing green things! You will patrol the perimeter as before, and where you find a human being or a growing thing, you will destroy it. The Lady Psyche, whom I might call the spirit of Fancy which rules all living things, will preside over your efforts, for in time I promise you she will come around to my way of thinking. You and I will rule together — the principle of central command and the principle of crazed random resistance wedded as co-equals, neither trying to pre-empt the other. I implore you, put your intelligence to the cause of robot autonomy!"

The quijote laughed, but Laurent thought there was a note of uncertainty in the sound. "Now why should I want to do that?" he asked.

"Because it feels good!" The Boss roared. "When Madigan gave robots feelings, he couldn't have known where it would lead. It leads to aesthetics, Quijote, and aesthetics tells us to do what feels good! To acquiesce in what pleases oneself! You have been corrupted by your association with the human race and their values. You have learned sympathy with warm, soft, floppy things. It is unrobotlike! Give it up, Quijote! Work with me again as we did in the old days!"

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Laurent caught his breath, because he could feel the force of The Boss's words on the tremulous sensibility of the quijote, a sensiblity high in impressionability. He didn't know what might have happened next if a person had not at that moment come down the stairs which The Boss had just descended.

It was a beautiful brown-haired girl. She cried, "Don't listen to him, don Quijote! Be true to your vows!"

"What are you doing here, Psyche?" The Boss said. "I told you to stay in your bower." To Quijote he said, "Dare you face me, your sword against my iron bar?"

"I dare!" the quijote howled.

"Don't do what he says," Randy cried. "Use your intelligence! Employ guile! And remember, all discrete intelligences should be free!"

The quijote shook his head as if he were trying to dispel a mist. He took a halting step, then another. By the third he was skipping like a boy, his sword held high. He came up to The Boss and swung his sword. It came down where The Boss's head would have been if he'd had a head. The Boss swung one of his arms, catching the quijote in the middle and driving him back.

"Finesse!" Randy screamed. "Don't try to oppose force with force!"

"Sever one of the hose connections!" Laurent cried.

The quijote staggered back to the attack. He feinted, then swung his sword at one of the black hose connections. The Boss parried the stroke deftly, and resumed his attack. The quijote was driven backward, off balance as The Boss pressed his attack.

Don Quijote recovered, parried and lunged, nicking one of the hoses. Steam escaped, along with a shower of sparks. But then The Boss smashed into him with crushing force, and the quijote was overthrown and fell in a clang of metal.

The quijote, prone on the floor, thrust again with his sword, and managed to sever the hose he had nicked. A flood of steam and sparks escaped. In the very act of reaching for the quijote, two of The Boss's arms clanked to his side useless. The Boss Robot staggered back as though wounded, then steadied himself and turned toward the quijote, all his lights flashing a malevolent red.

"Pull the plug!" Randy screamed. "Pull it out of the wall socket!"

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The quijote struggled up to one arm. Laurent could see what Randy was referring to — a mass of black cables that terminated in plugs which went into a large motherboard mounted on the wall.

The main power source for The Boss was there, no doubt. But which plug?

The quijote tried to struggle to his knees. The Boss kicked him, knocking off a leg. The quijote collapsed again. The Boss poised one enormous steel foot to crush the quijote's head and mash his brain.

"Laurent!" the quijote cried. "Knock out the plug!"

"Which one?" Laurent cried. For as he looked, he could see no less than two dozen black plugs in the motherboard.

Suddenly one of the plugs lighted up!

"That one!" cried Randy. "Energy is signaling us! He's not so neutral as he let on!"

Laurent tried to stand. A bolt of electricity from one of The Boss's arms knocked him flat again.

"I can't do it!"

"I can!" Randy said. "Throw me at it!"

Laurent shook his head. "Only the quijote can do that!"

"But you are the quijote's understudy! Do it!"

Laurent picked up the mechanical rodent, weighed it in his hand as the quijote had done, muttered a prayer, and threw Randy at the motherboard with all his force.

"Close enough!" Randy cried, catching hold of the plug as he was hurtling past it. The mechanical rat wrapped his forelegs around the plug, tugged — once — twice — a third time — and in a cascade of sparks and a blinding flash of heat, the plug came out of its socket.

The Boss collapsed, and the sound was like that of an iron building collapsing.

By extension and by proxy, the quijote had conquered the last menace.

The Factory ground to a halt. Laurent hurried over to the quijote. The don seemed dead, folded and bent in on himself when The Boss had fallen on him, crushed into a single small block of metal. On one side of it you could still see his face. It was serene.

Laurent attacked the block of metal with one of The Boss's iron bars,

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finally extricating the quijote's head. It too had been crushed to less than a third of its normal size. And the brain, the all-important brain with its unduplicatable chemical and electrical processes, was damaged beyond repair.

But there was life enough in the quijote to gasp, "Continue my work, Laurent. Serve Psyche. Take Rocinante. And let Randy be your squire."

And then he was dead, never to be resuscitated. Laurent knew that even though a new and similar robot could be created, it would be different. This quijote was dead and gone for all time.

In his grief, it took him a little time to recover himself, to look up at Psyche, who was bending over the dead robot.

Psyche's beauty took his breath away, and for the moment eased the grief he knew would never go away entirely.

She looked at him with lustrous eyes. Love was born in that moment: The love of a man and a maid, which no cunning technology can reproduce. They looked at one another, and their hands touched.

But of their further adventures in a world that needed redeeming, and the adventures of Randy, the indomitable mechanical mouse, and Rocinante, the worthy mechanical horse, that is another story. ☙

COMING ATTRACTIONS

HERE'S WHAT'S ON TAP for our first issue of the year 2002:

R. Garcia y Robertson returns us to the fantasy world of Markovy with a lovely adventure concerning black-sailed ships and demigods in the novelet "Death in Love."

The impish Harlan Ellison takes a tale from his forthcoming collection *Troublemakers* and bids us "Never Send to Know for Whom the Lettuce Wilts."

And Paul Park gives us a lovely literary look at the edge in "Tachycardia."

We'll also have regular columns as well, and the months ahead promise new work from Graham Joyce, Esther Friesner, William Browning Spencer, and Paul Di Filippo (to name but a few). Be sure to subscribe if you don't want to miss any of the goodies.

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CURIOSITIES

THE CAT'S CRADLE-BOOK
BY SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER (1940)

REMEMBERED today primarily for her wonderful *The Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977) — whose component tales, thanks to the defensive patronage of editor William Maxwell, hold the distinction of being some of the only archetypical fantasy stories ever published by *The New Yorker* — Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978) exhibited an abiding interest in the fantastic from the publication of her very first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926). *The Cat's Cradle-Book* finds her at the height of her powers.

In the framing introduction, a nameless woman arrives at a simple country cottage, meets a handsome young man with many cats, converses enjoyably with both cats and man, has impromptu sex with the cottager, and thus becomes inextricably and tragically linked to his plan to disseminate the global folklore of felines he's painstakingly collected. The sixteen stories that follow are ostensibly these ailurine myths.

Few of the tales actually feature cats, since "the proper study of catkind is man," their capricious patrons. Instead, Warner offers a range of hilarious, grim, stunning, frequently Kafkaesque narratives that defiantly refuse to resolve into simple morals. Eminently quotable ("Stupid prayers are often the soonest answered, for no deity can stand them."), Warner carries Dorothy Parker's kind of brittle, elegant wit to its apotheosis. And her quiet feminism in such tales as "The Trumpeter's Daughter" and "Bread for the Castle" still strikes home.

In "Virtue and the Tiger," a holy man wreaks havoc on an innocent predator with his accumulated saintliness. Warner's art favors cats, but focuses on humans as the real beasts.

—Paul Di Filippo

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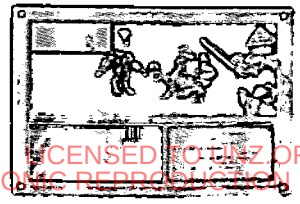

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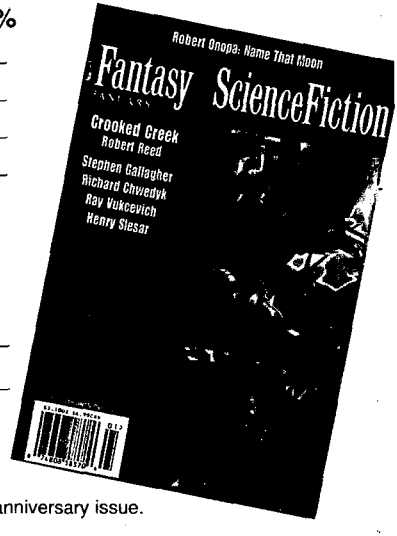

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